







THE FIRST PERSON
SINGULAR

WILLIAM ROSE BENÉT

THE FIRST PERSON SINGULAR

BY
WILLIAM ROSE BENÉT

NEW  YORK
GEORGE H. DORAN COMPANY

**COPYRIGHT, 1922,
BY GEORGE H. DORAN COMPANY**



PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

961
B466
f2

TO MY FRIEND
DMITRI

M295968

CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I SUPPOSE WE HAVE LUNCH	11
II RICHARD TERRILL SPEAKING	19
III THE PERSISTENCE OF JANE	25
IV MR. GARTNER GETS A LETTER	33
V TUPTON AND THE TEN	37
VI UNCLE ARTHUR THINKS NOTHING OF IT	45
VII BESSIE, SOLUS	50
VIII "THE GIRL WHO WAS BURNED UP"	54
IX ORDEAL	70
X UNCLE ARTHUR SYMPATHIZES WITH XERXES	91
XI HELEN AND THE CHINA ANIMALS	100
XII THE CHRISTIAN MARTYR OF "THE COLOS- SEUM"	113
XIII MS. BY ANON	125
XIV CORYAT CAN'T REMEMBER	135
XV "I AM RICHARD TERRILL"	144
XVI TRAGIC INTERLUDE	155
XVII MR. DUFFITT IS QUITE MISTAKEN	158
XVIII BESSIE ENLIVENS BREAKFAST	166
XIX ADELA LOOKS EIGHTEEN	173
XX SIRENA UNDER SUSPICION	182
XXI A QUIET EVENING	194
XXII WHO SHE MIGHT BE	203
XXIII IT COMES TO MISS CROME	214
XXIV UNCLE ARTHUR'S BOMBSHELL	221

CHAPTER		PAGE
XXV	CORYAT IS INOPPORTUNE	236
XXVI	A FERMENT OF MINDS	243
XXVII	THE MISOGYNIST CALLS	248
XXVIII	A REVELATION AND A RESCUE	253
XXIX	MISS ANN COLE AGAIN	261
XXX	SLADE FACES THE INCREDIBLE	266
XXXI	ADELA THINKS IT OVER	269
XXXII	AWAKENING	275
XXXIII	UNMISTAKABLY MRS. VENTRESS	282
XXXIV	THE PERPLEXITY OF BEING A CROWD	287
XXXV	UNCLE ARTHUR'S HOUR	293
XXXVI	FINALLY, THE FIRST PERSON SINGULAR	295

**THE FIRST PERSON
SINGULAR**

THE FIRST PERSON SINGULAR

CHAPTER I: SUPPOSE WE HAVE LUNCH

FLORA SIBLEY stood just outside the bronze doors of the north entrance to the New York Public Library, drawing on her suede gloves. From the top of the marble steps to Forty-second Street she surveyed the passersby without any real apprehension of their existence. She was slightly above the average height, rather slender. She wore, if exactitude be demanded, a navy-blue tricotine and a smart black hat, the latter nicely adjusted upon her dexterously arranged brown hair. She had a straight nose and a pleasing, quizzical mouth. Her eyebrows were pronouncedly curved, giving her an expression of surprise even when she was not particularly surprised. She had dark eyes.

But how many men can describe a woman? I shall dodge hastily behind the useful phrase "unique charm". Flora had it. It was enhanced by an aloof, slightly astringent manner, an innate shyness she had never quite conquered from girlhood.

Flora was a "pop" novelist—but you wouldn't have known it. In conversation you could not have connected her with the lapses into mediocrity and sentimentality so frequent in her books, with the facile literary compromises she had made for so many years. You could only feel, if you happened to know who she was at a dinner or a reception, that such dual personality bordered upon the incredible. In conversation she could be witty, even brilliant. It was her

quotidian return to the typewriter, upon which she "dashed off" both first drafts and revisions, that exerted the malign influence. Then, from her flying fingers, spattered that treacle of romance without which the mere bread and butter of life is, to most of us, both stale and unprofitable. Most of us were, after all, responsible for Flora.

By the courage and cleverness of her own brain she had forged a weapon of style. After persistent unsuccess she had also forged the tools to blunt and dull it. Finally she had fashioned her literary self not in her own but in the Public's image. Yet nobility persisted in her face, for she was fundamentally a fighter, possessed of a natural spiritual courage against odds. She had merely misapplied it.

Her maternal instinct was strong. She often pitied other people to excruciation, quite sincerely. Her characters became to her as the people she pitied. Then she could refuse them nothing, money, children, countryhouses, candy-box love-affairs, hairbreadth rescues, hummingbirds and roses. It wasn't good for them. And any social criticism implied in the works of this authoress was always smoothed over with a large solution of faith, hope and charity. Some problems necessitated laying it on pretty thick.

Flora was thirty-five. She had begun writing novels ten years ago and had produced just exactly ten. She had made a pot of money. O Flora! But I like Flora very much, in spite of my natural brutality. You couldn't help it.

So she stood, half-smiling at her own thoughts, at the top of marble steps to a tawdry newspaper-blown street. Any man in love with her, as he looked at her, might have felt his pulse accelerate. Her small pugnacious chin was tilted upward.

Wherever she went, would not her thousand photographic likenesses follow her? But that was what gave her the half-smile. She recalled some of them. She took such an abominable picture. She remembered her own particular gallery of them: Orphant Annie, The Pride of the Harem, The Super-Clubwoman, Pride's Purge, Maybelle the Movie

Star, Old Mother Hubbard, Vampirina. She herself had bestowed the titles. No, they'd never in the world——!

She grasped her small suede handbag with decision. Sunlight and a breeze brought colour to her cheek. Her air was distinguished. She was almost beautiful.

She *was* beautiful to a certain straw-hatted gentleman in heather-mixture cheviot, pausing in his stride along the opposite side of Forty-Second Street. He halted in front of a window displaying a large oil portrait of an atrabilious individual whose painted nose supported a pair of imitation tortoiseshell eyeglasses. The eyeglasses were real. That was what people said when they loitered in front of the window. But Richard Coryat's back was toward it.

He got himself immediately across the street between a Dodge, a cross-town car and a brown and white taxi. He met Flora as she descended to the pavement.

"I called last night, but——"

"O, I'm *so* sorry. A friend of mine was ill and leaving town. (Well, Lucy had certainly been leaving town, in a month, and she *looked* ill!) I should have called you up, or left a message. I forgot. How are you?"

"Splendidly—now," he couldn't help adding. "Which way are you going? Mightn't we——?"

"Well, to tell the truth," Flora smiled, "I'm sure I don't know. I've just been looking up something in there. I——"

"Won't you lunch with me?"

"No—I'm afraid that——yes, suppose we do. Dutch. I'm an independent person, you know, Mr. Coryat."

After all, why not? She had been rather mean to him probably. She could go back to her Gramercy Park apartment or to the National Arts Club. But after all, why not? He looked agreeable. He *was* interesting *if* too persistent. They were at the corner. His fingers barely touched her elbow as they crossed Forty-Second Street. They walked slowly up the Avenue.

"You got my note about 'Golden Windfall'?"

Her eyes had turned toward him, her head was slightly bent.

"Yes. I'm glad you agree with me. But I knew you'd appreciate it."

"Why?"

"Why, because—oh, I don't know. It's your sort of a book."

"How about my own books?"

"Well, to make a horrible confession, I've been so busy this last month getting settled I haven't had a chance to read them yet. And you see I was away from America for ten years. I'm frightfully ignorant about your work really. But I certainly intend to remedy that."

"Don't!"

"Why not?"

"They're awful!"

"I refuse to believe it!" he laughed.

"They are, they're atrocious. I'm sick of them. It's your fault though."

"How?"

"Terrill's book. Don't you know that you and he are responsible for a positively suicidal mood on the part of this particular lady novelist?"

"Good Lord, what do you mean?"

"Oh, don't be scared," she laughed, and then was grave. "I simply mean I seem to have come to a turning-point. 'Golden Windfall' did it. Of course you couldn't know. And you couldn't know that I opened Terrill's book with a feeling of great superiority and a decided aversion to him. But, it's curious, he has convinced me as no one else has ever been able to convince me of the obligations of a talent. 'The artistic conscience'! (She laughed shortly—rather harshly.) You see I had become pretty case-hardened, I guess. And then, of course, I have made money. And there's so much trifling and idling in the name of Art. So much buncombe. But he got me."

"But I know you're exaggerating——"

Flora gave him a swift side-glance.

"No," she almost snapped, with an expressionless face. "It's worse than you think."

He changed the topic to suggest a tea-room on West Forty-sixth Street. Seated at a corner table near the window, they confided the appeasement of their hunger to an entirely indifferent waitress. She returned in five minutes having forgotten the order. "What was it you said?" They told her all over again.

Flora opened her handbag and scrutinized its interior intently, moving her face about with great seriousness. Richard Coryat realised, when she raised her eyes, that he had been staring at her. He thought he had rarely seen such a thoroughly honest gaze. Yet it was veiled to him. Her own work must be infinitely better than she thought.

"Do you know," said Flora, and then suddenly curtailed her sentence. What she had been going to ask would never do. She must escape him. Yes, even after his introducing her to Terrill's book. He had become altogether too interested. She wished, in fact, to get rid of all of them, editors, publishers, literary acquaintances. The thing to do was to make a complete break. She would go back——. She as suddenly smiled to herself at this persistent invasion of her creative imagination.

The fish and salad having made its appearance, with rolls and pots of tea, she listened to Coryat as he talked of Paris and the Riviera. His voice was light, high, with a certain harsh, hurt strain in it. He told some interesting stories. He became animated as he talked, his greenish blue eyes sparkled. His lean brown face with its deep but not prominent jaw and somewhat broad and uptilted nose was attractively homely. His light brown hair was thick, difficult to part properly and inclined toward curliness. He had a characteristic habit of tilting his head upward and back with great suddenness. He betrayed nervousness by the restless gestures of his hands. His ears were too large, his mouth was broad and firm, half-hidden beneath a close-cropped

mustache that had come out sandy. He was not above the average height and, in the street, save for the keenness of his gaze, you might easily have passed him as the average man.

"What do you intend to do now, Mr. Coryat?"

"Not foreign correspondence any more at any rate. I don't really know. I'm tired of journalism. This inheritance I told you about——. Of course I really intend to write, but I don't know exactly what. There's a different feel to things over here, on first reacquaintance at any rate. Seems so much all Business. But then Europe's a ruin. France is about the only real intellectual centre. But the War's spoiled most things. I certainly got fed up on fracas—as well as on discipline—in the Legion. Yet it seems to me I hate worse the stupor I find over here—a stupor as to ideas. Of course that sounds superior. I don't mean it so. As a matter of fact I *am* getting back my old love for New York, love like hatred. It certainly hasn't lost its fascination, though it's changed. But socially and politically and so on, doesn't the country seem dead to you? Look at this administration."

"Well, I admit we seem to care very little for personality over here. At least now. It *wasn't* so, certainly. But industrialism has us, and moulds. Take our writers. Well," she smiled ruefully, "take me. I'm a grand example of the American idea of success, in literature. You'd better go home and read my books—if you can stand it."

"Oh, come!" he said unbelievably; "but if standardisation is the cry to-day, as it certainly was in the War, I think just the same that we're bound to swing out of it again. There are a number of signs. Certainly order and system under special privilege and convention are really figments of the imagination—any real order, any real system——"

"You're a Socialist, are you?"

"No. Not an anything-ist. Satisfactory social systems are a problem. The point is, under any system, the attitude of the people. I'm certainly *not* for the present amount of

special privilege. Yet—there's personal liberty too. Maybe the anarchists have, after all, the best doctrine for the individual soul. Only I don't believe it. I believe in some system. Not too much. Socialism might easily become as autocratic as capitalism, in a different way. Here's what I mean. The spirit in this country. I believe you're right about the individual. Who wants another war? I certainly don't. War is a rotten thing. I've seen it and I know. But in a crisis like a great war there comes certainly a new spirit, a solidarity. Something more than mere comfort and ease. An ideal. Something burning. Now that that's left us——"

"Maybe it hasn't!"

"Yes, I think it has. The present lies with the individual. If I'm purged of any jingoism I had, as well as of old-line socialism—for I had both in a sense—I'm also against the moulds of this present phase of industrialism. I'm for the growth of the individual now as the only thing that will resurrect us from the grave we've fallen into with our dead. And I don't mean the old Puritanical idea of character either. I mean the life that makes itself felt by courage and pioneering, by thinking for itself—not by mob formulas."

Like the opinions voiced in most casual conversation, his own tripped and stumbled over each other. You could have annihilated some of his easy summaries. Flora, like most of us, picked out merely the phrases that applied to her own immediate problem. She liked the eagerness in his eyes and a certain suppressed scorn in his voice. Also, he seemed to know the names of things.

"So you're an individualist?"

"H'm," he drew his compressed lips inward. "I don't know. At present we're all slaves to mechanism. Perhaps more so because we're a democracy, we're formularised. The proper expression of personality—the characteristic differences between human beings—well, call it the first person singular, in two senses, is what interests me most. Over here I find types, not people. In Europe, and even—paradoxically—in the war, despite all the regimenting of every-

thing, and the discipline—I found *people*. It was due, I guess, to the crisis. Men and women revealed themselves. Now, over here at least, they've crept back into convention. There's more real life in Minetta Lane than all upper New York. There's a type of business man, a type of society woman, a type of flapper, yes, and a type of everything else. You say there's a type of American novelist. There's the suburb type and the city type. It may be silly of me—or it may be a snap-judgment—but I want *people*, not types."

"People," murmured Flora Sibley. "Yes. Real people. I want them too."

A silence fell between them as he drew out a silver cigarette case, chose a cigarette, and tapped it upon the table.

CHAPTER II: RICHARD TERRILL SPEAKING

MR. CORYAT was interesting, yes. But the fact remained that she wanted to escape him, to escape them all. She sat at the window of her sitting-room looking out over green, sunny Gramercy Park. The things she had lived for seemed now particularly worthless. She had fulfilled certain responsibilities, of course, paid certain debts. That much was true, but——.

Why had he happened to lend her that book? She didn't know. But wasn't she glad after all? She knew she was. However, the mental disgust returned. She could see herself as she must have looked at two of that last Sunday morning, when she had finished the last page of "Golden Windfall." She could see herself getting up from the davenport, walking slowly toward the open window, standing staring out upon the mysteriously moonlit park. The mental nausea. Good Heavens! Well, it was true. And it was the test.

She had never heard of the writer before. Richard Terrill. Richard Terrill. What in heaven's name was the matter with American publishers *not* to have heard of him? Well, they would now. That was her first duty, to spread knowledge of his book. He must be an Englishman. It was an English book. How old was he, she wondered. How in heaven's name had he managed to show her her very own problem so keenly yet so kindly?

First emotional impressions did not live. But he had said something living. The truth of it was burned in her heart. Yet, on analysis, it was simple enough and something she had seen all along. However, the words were now a part of her, they had irrevocably changed her.

The puppet procession began again to pass through the clear light of what he had said. The puppets proceeded out of the shadow, showed in the light for an instant with a startling clarity of detail, sank again into the shadow. She had been so proud of Sallie Pryor—at least leave her Sallie Pryor! Sallie stood in that light with the jerky gestures of a grimacing doll, leered, disappeared grotesquely. The light was utterly pitiless.

Clarriby Null of "The Wiseacres". Clarriby came creeping avoidingly into the light—stood and blinked in it. The light began to blacken his edges. It burst through. It consumed him with little eating flames. He was a slight shower of infinitesimal ashes.

Tortured, lugubrious shapes, pitifully processional. Barker Straik, George Phillips, little laughing Nelly Madox, Jane Orgue, the Cranes, the Busbees—all incredibly galvanized painted pasteboard. Or floating ghosts that faded piecemeal in the light. The words of their wraithlike voices hummed about her. The lives of her puppets swept round her like a sea—voices of age, of childhood, from the froth and ferment of her brain. The skein of all their lives hung on a hook in the blank wall of her mind. She had tugged threads from it, knotted them into patterns, patterns that also passed into that light and were consumed like a spider-web under a burning-glass. It was too awful!

It was desperately unkind not even to leave her Sallie Pryor. An enormous public had liked Sallie. One hundred thousand copies of "The June Bug" had been printed. Sallie had made her fortune. The light was cruel, unkind. The man's book was hideous, untrue. The man was an idiot, or simply an ineffectual angel. What he saw as art was really a supersensitive and impossibly stern avoidance of the compromises necessary in real life. Life was simple. You needed distraction and money. You worked for money. You made the most of your ability. The public would buy certain things. You gave them that. No one who had not come the hard, practical road to financial success could pos-

sibly know how sweet it was to have fought your way, met your obligations, gained once more ease, leisure, a bright world of royalties, nice clothes, decorous applause. And no one who had not been through——! Her indignant thought paused.

But she *had* made her way, at least. She saw perfectly clearly the road behind her. A girl's idealistic decision and disastrous experiment; the escape; persistent brave effort; the man, the woman who had helped her. The development of a gift at first desperately meagre; the bleak interim; finally—what the world knew as "success". Suddenly, one day, the grasp of the box-of-tricks, the formula. Labouring over the dénouement of her tenth short story, she had seen. She was perfectly conscious at the time,—she must have been; yet, somehow, not at all conscious. She knew that it was not her idea of good writing, of what she could really do. But the desperation of her mind at the time stifled the thought. And the formula had proved correct. Read the reviews!

Then why had this book of Terrill's intruded to shatter the dream? It was surely a beneficent dream enough. A world of bright laughter, sound sermons, happy people, wholesome moods. A beneficent dream that had cheered the lives of thousands! She smiled grimly. That phrase was from the jacket of "Rosemary and Rue". But wasn't it true? It had. Always the happy ending. Always the sweetmeats and bonbons tucked into the lavendered folds of the story. Always the delight in life—or had it been merely in "laying it on thick"? *Had* she grown to believe it was life? She must have. It was accepted as life. It was thoroughly wholesome and uplifting. Good heavens!

That girl had been so excruciatingly unhappy. Wistful, hard-worked, hungry, romantic, sentimental,—then crushed. Then so bravely trying to build up the fairy story that might have come true. She had thought, at least, to make it come true for others. Then how had she lost the substance for the shadow?

A long accumulation of small scraps of advice and counsel came to her, from many a successful writer, from many a seasoned editor; advice to which she hungrily listened, advice that had finally crystallised itself into The Formula. She remembered now beginnings in so different a vein. Two pages of that third, often-rejected story for instance, "The Barrier". She closed her eyes to see the two figures in those pages pass under that scathing light of Terrill's words. Of all the characters her teeming thought had created those two alone did not move like automata. Their small but distinct voices rang true in her inner ear. She had finally torn that story into strips, and from strips into fine fragments.

That girl; the girl of those days, lean, suffering, puzzled, embittered, in her frayed grey wrapper and tousled hair, scribbling desperately in that back hall room of Mrs. Murtrie's, writing on the varnish-peeled wash hand-stand, the big white crockery basin and pitcher (with their impossible red-lily decoration) standing beside her upon the threadbare piece of carpet to which she had removed them. Oh (suddenly), to have her back, that thin, passionate, intolerably shy, madly battling girl of ten years ago!

Well, to work! That manuscript in the binder had to be shipped off to Harvey Wick of "The Criterion". She rose from her cretonned chair, unlocked her desk, and spent the next fifteen minutes or so correcting a few sentences. Then she reached for the notebook she had tossed on the table and worked steadily for half an hour "pointing up" the reference to the Boxer outbreak. It was four o'clock when she had finished, and she had invited Mr. Seelye to tea at the National Arts at 4:30. He was connected with the Bozarre Picture Corporation. The moving-picture rights of "Rosemary and Rue" were under consideration. Flora Sibley sighed, closed and locked her big desk, and called softly for Marie.

* * *

Flora nibbled a butter-thin and listened to Mr. Irwin Seelye. His face distinctly resembled a Regensburg cigar sign. It had creamed lobster and "The Follies of 1920" written large all over it. Mr. Seelye inhaled his tea.

"They'll eat it!" pronounced Mr. Seelye. "See if they don't. They'll eat it. Home and mother." He beamed gelatinously at her.

"The only trouble being," said Flora sweetly, "that I've chucked the whole business now, Mr. Seelye."

"You mean the royalties? Well now I'll tell you——"

"No, I mean I'm tired of the whole business. I'm going away."

"Oh! Oh, vacation. Course you're tired. Should think so. 'Mount of work you turn out. But you needn't worry 'bout the picture till you get good and rested. We could go right ahead with it. We'd have to do that anyway."

"You don't understand me. I've just delivered my last novel to Harvey Wick according to contract. I had to. But I'm out of it now. I've decided not to sell any more movie rights."

"Well, what *is* your figure?"

"I must repeat that you misunderstand me, Mr. Seelye. The rights to 'Rosemary and Rue' simply aren't on the market. I should have told you that at once—but you looked tired and I wanted you to have some tea. Pardon me if I haven't broken it especially gently."

"Well, what d'you—why, but—but, Miss Sibley, you really don't mean that?"

"I'm afraid I do. You see I'm just sickened suddenly—of the whole thing."

"But of what?"

"Of writing rot, of purveying rot, of stuffing the public with rot. I'm through."

The belligerent small chin was in evidence. Flora's eyes stared straight ahead of her at nothing in particular.

"Well, now of course, Miss Sibley," the tone was meant to be pacifying. "You know really that there's no reason

at all for you to talk that way. Not the slightest. Look how your work goes. Look how good it is. Haven't I just been telling you that the public'll eat up 'Rosemary and Rue'?"

"Yes, that's the whole trouble. I believe they would."

"But isn't this reasonable!" Flora suddenly sat up very straight and looked at him with clear wide eyes. "Isn't this reasonable. I have made all the money I want. That, as all of us know is 'the object in view'. Well, I've made enough. But I've just come to see what I've made it by. We needn't go into that. I'm through, that's all."

"Sorry," she said a few moments later, at the door of the National Arts, to this rather dazed myrmidon of the producers. "I see you don't quite understand it. Perhaps I'm wrong. Only I don't think so. Good-bye!"

Mr. Irwin Seelye paused to light a fat cigar as he reached Fourth Avenue. He tilted it toward the not-far-distant Metropolitan Tower and looked vaguely up and down the street.

"Now I wonder," he said to himself, "just what she is holding out for! Well,—she's bound to snap out of it."

He began to walk slowly south on Fourth Avenue. He continued to wonder.

Flora, meanwhile, returning to her apartment, called in Marie. It was not on the matter of dinner. Later she held several telephone conversations and made several appointments, one with her friend Phil Bruston of the Park Avenue Bank. Fortunately he was not out of town. She experienced a strange thrill in the thought that she was setting wheels in motion. She knew now that she had finally decided.

CHAPTER III: THE PERSISTENCE OF JANE

THREE weeks later, in his rooms on the opposite side of Gramercy Park, Richard Coryat was filling a pipe from a large glass humidor on the table in his sitting-room. He had seen Flora several times lately. Now, it seemed, she was gone. Still vivid before the lens of his thought floated a likeness of her face. He liked smart black hats and blue tricotine. He liked peculiarly-arched eyebrows. He liked dark eyes. He liked——. His mouth drew down lugubriously at the corners. He exhaled through his nose sharply and shook his head. He shrugged. He went over and relapsed deeply into the Chesterfield before the empty fireplace. He sat puffing at a pipe he had forgotten to light.

His face sharpened as he sat in thought, his cheeks drew gaunt. His left arm came up on the back of the Chesterfield, and his head leaned upon his left hand. His hand kept smoothing back his hair with a softly grinding motion of the heel of it upon his left temple. His teeth showed as he bit the stem of his pipe again and again.

Flora—and Jane. He wondered what on earth Jane could be doing now. He wondered for the ten thousand two hundred and twenty-fifth time in eighteen years whether he had acted like a cad. He didn't see how he had. But he wondered. That the ache should be so keen—still—at times—what did that imply? Well then, the implication was correct. He still loved her.

But was it that? A man's physical hunger was so treacherous; and he had avoided women. Was it that? Could it be that only? Was it the old possessiveness, that issue on which they had broken? No. That wasn't true. It simply wasn't. He had learned that lesson.

Had he? And should he want to find her? He certainly wondered what she was doing.

She had dismissed him. He was young—what a kid he was then, what an infant! What a goings-on he had made within himself about his pride! What a horrible thing, and what an incredibly childish thing it had been anyway! How proud they both were! As Lucifer. Lucifer had brought the light. Lucifer matches. His pipe wasn't lit! He felt along the table backing the couch for matches. The tobacco seethed as it caught and he popped his lips with the first exhalations.

Nineteen years ago he had been one of the most promising young newspapermen in New York. A year later, in considerable bitterness of spirit, he had decided to leave the United States altogether. He had.

He had gone first to South America on a fruit company steamer. He had knocked around Rio and then sailed for France. Journalistic facility, an ability to live through discomforts and rough experiences, kept him on his feet. Also, despite his sorrow, he possessed an intense interest in life. He enjoyed new sights and new people. Once in France he had gained a livelihood by writing for the Paris edition of a Chicago paper. He applied himself to a work of fiction and went to England. It found a publisher and actually brought him some royalties. He lived in cheap lodgings and made enough pickings from journalism to support mind and body for several years. This whole period of his life, however, was somewhat depressing to remember. But his fascination with the human comedy had pulled him through. He had made friends and acquaintances. He had returned to France before the War, sporadically affluent, in general impecunious. When the War broke out he had enlisted in the Foreign Legion at the instance and for the companionship of a friend. He had certainly seen action? He had been wounded and had spent several months in a French hospital. After the Armistice he had gone back to journalism. The War had not improved his position. For all the rapid-fire

work he had turned out in fifteen years no literary reputation was his. His one novel was now completely forgotten. He wondered to-day, rather dismally, how it had ever managed to sell at all.

He had expected things of the War. A gallant end in action. The nearest he got to it was being buried by a shell in an *abri*. After that it seemed to him that anticlimax piled upon anticlimax, until, after he recovered from his wound, he was reduced to the position of a mere military clerk in a Paris office. Once out of uniform he had begun to write again, from his war experience and from various memories of his intermittent wanderings before the war, in Spain, in South America, in Algeria.

One morning he had experienced mental paralysis in the news that his Aunt Clara Bowers of Pittsburgh had chosen to remember him upon her deathbed to this end, that, "I give, devise and bequeath to my nephew, Richard Ripston Coryat, his heirs and assigns forever, one undivided half of the remainder of my estate real and personal." Aunt Clara had died a wealthy old lady. It came to ten thousand a year, that remainder. He had forgotten all about Aunt Clara. Hadn't seen her since he was a freckled boy of ten who used to greatly prize the pumpkin pie she was fond of making. The only reason he could attribute in his own mind for this startling bequest was a remark that floated back through the shimmering mists of time, made by him in a voice breaking,—no, not with emotion,—with the advance of young manhood: "Gee, Aunt Clara, I like your pies!"

It was the truth. And it was all he could remember. Out of the conquered past unravishable financial relief born of an early passion for pie. Superb irony. He hardly remembered even what Aunt Clara had looked like, save that she wore a silk shawl and was rather stout, and that her house on a hill had two cast-iron dogs on the front lawn. Well, God bless her anyway! He pinched himself a number of times. It was, to him, one of the oddest things that could possibly have happened. Which was, after all, a strange

belief to be cherished by one so familiar with the news of the world in the daily press.

For a while after that it was difficult for him to take himself seriously. He strove hard enough, of course, to remember Aunt Clara and evoke some more fundamental reason than pie for the bequest. He tried to imagine he had always been her favourite nephew—that she had loved little boys—that his father had been her favourite brother. He simply couldn't remember. His mother had still been alive when Aunt Clara was indulging her culinary propensities. His father had followed her to the grave while Richard was a senior in high school. Uncle Jim had taken him to live in Brooklyn. Aunt Clara was never mentioned by Uncle Jim. They were not related and did not like each other. Aunt Clara had completely faded out of all recollection. She had never written, certainly. Yet she had been "of sound and disposing mind, and capable of executing a valid deed". There was no flaw in the disposition of her property. There you were.

It irritated him in a manner he discovered to be petty, that after a tragic love-affair and an ensuing life of rather threadbare grimness, after a war hallucination that broke down in absurd unheroic anticlimax, after days and weeks and months he so well remembered in which he had seemed the sport of destiny, he should suddenly be set upon his feet with genuine opportunity after the manner of a short story in the *Saturday Evening Post*. Had life then any genuine sequence or dignity? But there it was. The grotesque side of life was always poking its waggish face around the corner of his mind whenever he became comfortable in one of his dream selves; those dream selves we all fashion of a high solitary grandeur.

No. Jane would have made her way. But why hadn't he heard of it? She was going to write books. He knew books. There were no books of hers on the market. But then she had also begun to be interested in social conditions. Perhaps she had "gone in" for that. He had inquired. She

had left the "Sphere",—oh, it must have been that next year. Nobody knew down there where she was now. New city editors, new managing editors had come and gone. Blakely and Fitch, those two old timers, remembered, remembered her and him. Remembered their engagement. He remembered that one Spring. Benches in Washington Square. Hansoms. Good God, there were hansoms then, not taxis! Eighteen years ago. "The Black Cat". Finzetti's. Well. "The Cat" was still in evidence. Finzetti had gone back to Italy before the War, he heard.

And Lord, how different prices were then, not to mention wages. How could a girl like that live on twelve dollars a week. But she did. And really they both had lived rather royally, in spite of the boarding house. The basement dining-room where that strange Mr. Quigley who worked in a bank had put a bunch of violets at her place the day after they had announced their engagement. The fuss of pleasure old Mrs. Staples had made, the woman who looked exactly like a head of lettuce, with her green flounces. How they had laughed at that! What a string of intimately amused little jokes they had had over the others. That person—what was his name?—that man who had been a policeman. The one they called between themselves The Habitual Henchman. What in the devil *was* his name?

Well, who could possibly have imagined he wouldn't have found anyone else after all, anyone to supplant those memories. In a certain light it was rather ridiculous. But then . . . Miss Sibley now was certainly charming . . . But . . .

Jane often came in and sat on a chair in his living-room. She had done that in Paris and in London too, in Rio and at Cairo. She still had on the brown street dress in which he had last seen her, and the hat so out of fashion nowadays. She tortured a minute cambric handkerchief in small square hands and her eyes were full of tears. She had brown hair and brown eyes, like pools in a forest. He had once told her that. She looked at him under level brows. Her chin trembled but her lower lip was bitten white. She sat and

looked at him, without anger. Looked through him. He *had* been a cad.

Of course you could always see the door-jamb or the wall-corner, or whatever was hung upon or stood against the wall, through the diaphaneity of Jane. She usually came after midnight. Once she came in the afternoon on a street in Pernambuco. That was a comparatively short time after the break. She looked up at him and took his arm. That was the hardest to bear. Walking in the sunlight, along the white street, with the white houses glaring. With Jane on his arm—a Jane no one else could see. She suddenly left him, crossing a square . . .

No, all this money meant for him must be the opportunity to do some really creative writing, the chance he had coveted through years of time-serving. *Could* he ever do another novel? Should he begin with—what? Some more articles, till he got his hand in?

Another thing that perplexed him was his having gone over to call on Flora Sibley that afternoon and his finding out from the elevator-man at the desk that she had sublet her apartment and vanished. He had talked to the sub-leasees. They did not know her plans or where she had gone. A Mr. Bruston was handling the matter for her. Coryat had not seen her for a week. He had called up three days before and had heard her voice. She had given him no intimation of her intention. Oh, well, after all, why should she? Yet her going seemed to leave a certain vacancy. He must read that book of hers he had bought to-day at Brentano's. Her books *couldn't* be as bad as she had intimated.

He settled himself under the standing lamp in a comfortable corner. He was in his brown dressing-gown. He began to read "Rosemary and Rue". The small cased clock ticked upon the mantle across the room. The light from the lamp lay in a golden pool about him. Outside the nearby window vines dripped and the rain whispered softly.

The expression upon Richard Coryat's face grew more and more pained. Twice he snorted, twice he sniffed, thrice

he stared up with harassed disbelief in his eyes. Finally the book dropped from his hands. It was too unbelievable!

She couldn't have written it. A woman like that *couldn't*. He closed the book and took it up in its picture jacket. The cover design was that of a stalwart young man in khaki and high-laced boots embracing a frail, blonde young woman clad in some material that looked like window-curtain. The young woman clung to him upon a rocky hilltop. The young man's face was uplifted. The illustrator had evidently intended to endue him with exaltation. He had succeeded in making him look as if he were sniffing a smelter. Something was evidently burning. This impression was increased by a conflagrate sunset behind the two figures.

Unfortunately the contents of the book was of a piece with the cover.

She *couldn't* have written it.

She had. There was her name. Under it, God save the mark, "Thirtieth Thousand".

He opened the book and began to go through it again, hastily, but with a careful scanning of pages. One halted him. He settled himself to read. He read it and the two following. The tension in his face relaxed. Then it came again. He skipped several chapters. Again a page halted him. Again he read.

A half hour passed. At the end of it, Coryat laid the book down again with a sigh. Flashes—decided flashes—amid a welter of absolutely inexcusable sentimentality. She could write like that on the pages whose corners he had dog-eared, and yet, she could write—all the rest!

He stared at nothing, and Jane grew out of the chair opposite. She sat demurely, hands quiet in her lap. They were working at the diminutive handkerchief. Her eyes were on him now. They were full of tears.

"Oh, Jane, Jane, Jane!"

He had not spoken the words, but it was exactly as if he had spoken them. The room was full of words. Full of her own low last word to him. "*Good-bye!*"

He wondered what she was doing.

She had built a new life by now. She did not need or want him. She had fought through to some new happiness. He was still a selfish fool. An incredibly selfish fool.

He wanted somebody. He was intolerably lonely.

He was a beastly idiot, a perfect infant. Strong, perhaps, when the outlook was absolutely blank. Weak in the hour of opportunity. This money. His writing.

He wanted Jane.

His loneliness illuminated his mind with a dry, harsh light that showed it intolerably empty. Across the cracked and broken tesserae of the floor of a ruined palace sparse thought rustled like dry leaves. He had actually seen such a ruin once. Near Ombos.

He sat up and looked around him. He felt weak in bone and sinew. Outside his window the rain rustled. It had probably suggested the rustling of those leaves.

Jane. Flora. Why had she left without a single word for him? But why should she?

He would sleep like the dead to-night. He hoped he would never wake up. After all, who was dependent upon him?

"Oh, what did I do to you, Jane?"

He was in a nice state of mind indeed. He was a preposterous ass. He had better go to bed.

He would start the first of those articles to-morrow. To-morrow he was to lunch with Lin Jessup at the Players. And with an old acquaintance who had arranged the meeting at Coryat's intimation. "The Coming Age", after all, *might* want what he wanted to write . . .

CHAPTER IV: MR. GARTNER GETS A LETTER

ON a certain afternoon in May, Jake Gartner, postmaster of Tupton, Pennsylvania, came out of the yellow-painted brick building at the corner of Market and Willow Streets and stood looking across at the platform of the Railroad Station, where a seedy individual in a grey sweater occupied himself with a painted tin chocolate and gum machine that stood against the station building. He had removed the front of the machine and was scooping chinking handfuls of change into the pocket of his sweater. He returned the front to its place, locked it with a click and jingle of keys, and picked up the long container he had removed for replenishment. He came across the street toward Mr. Gartner.

"Been a hot day a'ready, ain't it Abe?" The gentleman addressed as Abe jerked his head in reply and spat accurately over his shoulder into the gutter. His agency for the station candy machines gave him, over and above his combination news room and billiard parlor, an importance in his own eyes.

"Yeah. Any nooze?"

"Not much. Jase'll have a chance to get their place rented for the Battells now though."

"Who? Jase Duffit? Why?"

"Letter from a New York lady. Thinks she wants to live here. Askin' about propuppy."

"Thasso? That's a queer one. Thinka wantin' here when yeh could live in N'York."

"What I thought. We-el, I guess I'll be gettin' home to supper. Goin' home yerself?"

"Yeah. It's after seven aint it. That six o'clock train

makes me a busy time 'thout help. S'pose you'll be back here again workin' till all hours."

"Not to-night. Got another touch o' my asthmy. Kil-kevin'll do the extra sortin'. We-el, I'll be movin', I guess. S'long Abe."

"S'long Jake. See ye to-morrow."

Mr. Gartner passed rather importantly down Willow Street, looking across at the Livery Stable. He waved with a loose gesture to Jackson Weil who sat just outside the door of the latter smoking a pipe and caressing a black-spotted carriage dog. He turned into Monument and crossed the street toward a decent white house with a small iron-fenced front yard.

Mr. Gartner found supper already upon the table and his wife, coming in from the kitchen, with flushed face and disordered hair, her hands disposing the latter's moist tendrils, sat down to help him to a veal chop and smoking baked beans. She began to discuss the salient features of the day's routine.

"Got a letter I got to take up to Jase Duffit," remarked Mr. Gartner, finally, after rolling his secret for a while luxuriously upon his mental palate. He produced it with that casualness that always lends such flavor to a matter of import.

"What's that?" returned his wife, halting mid-way in mastication. She looked at him with frank suspicion, the way of most indurated wives.

"Lady in New York wants to rent a furnished house here. References look good. Seems sort of high-toned. You know the Battells have been after Jase to rent their place if he could fer summer an' fall."

"Huh. My land, what's she want t' come here fer? How many of her is there?"

To this odd mathematical question Mr. Gartner returned simply:

"Self and maid."

"Maid," sniffed Mrs. Gartner. "Maid, indeed." Which latter ejaculation seemed strikingly inferential.

"Well," she added, rising to clear away the plates and bring back saucers for the apple-sauce, "Some has them, I s'pose. New York must be a queer place. So full o' these transients. But what's my lady think she's goin' to do in Tupton, I wonder?"

"Do?" Mr. Gartner's tone expressed a mild surprise. "Do? Nothing. Why should she? Live here."

Mrs. Gartner vouchsafed a somewhat acrid smile in the general direction of the knitted dining-room motto.

"She'll find it dead. Dead enough." She said between mouthfuls of apple-sauce. "Guess she thinks she's comin' here fer peace and quiet. Plenty o' that. An' niggers. Let's see the letter," she added suddenly, a new acquisitive note in her voice.

Her husband drew an envelope from his inner breast pocket. "Careful of it," he warned. "Gotta show it to Jase."

Mrs. Gartner's only reply to this was a rather embittered stare which she meant to make dignified. She held the blue notepaper somewhat away from her and read it with her head turned slightly sideways and tilted. Her lips were primly drawn together.

"I don't know as we want her in Tupton," she remarked as she finished deciphering. "It smells," she added, sniffing. "Vi'lets."

"Well, what if it does? Jase wants to rent that house, don't he? And you can see by the way she writes she's a lady. (Mrs. Gartner interrupted at this point with another sardonic sniff.) See what she says about a quiet spot——"

"Why don't she go to the mountains? Don't she know it's hot as the hinges down here along in July?"

"Guess she don't. But what have you got against her, Ag? You don't even know her. Here, gimme that letter back!"

Mrs. Gartner returned it with a somewhat contemptuous

flirt. "Adela Ventress," was all she would add, "Ain't it a name!" Mr. Gartner ignored this cryptic addition.

"Guess I'll go over to Jase's right now," he said, a trifle importantly, after a second or two. His wife made no reply but rose to clear away the dishes.

When Mr. Gartner returned an hour later he heard the creak of his wife's rocking on the porch as he stooped to unlatch the gate. A midge-infested arc-lamp on Willow near the Livery Stable threw jiggling shadows from the young leafage of the trees. The lisp of his step as he came up the walk stopped the rocking. His shoes thumped on the steps. The other rocker, the one with the leather seat, complained of his weight. A slow creaking, now duotoned began again.

"Jase say?" questioned Mrs. Gartner after a while in a low voice.

"Thinks the Battell place might suit her. He'll write her to-morra."

"Warm, aint it?" His wife's voice was almost wistful. His own rocking stopped. Then, "Yeah," he said. "It's a warm evening." He began rocking again.

The minute, melodic sawing sound of an insect in the grass proceeded intermittently. Down Monument Street the Courthouse clock struck its faint half-hour chime. Voices came indistinguishably from Elm Street.

CHAPTER V: TUPTON AND THE TEN

ONCE round the curve behind Meldon Ridge, with the Knob lifting into prominence above low rolling hills on your right, before the iron forefoot of the swaying train the land dipped into sunlight from the shadows between high slopes. At the risk of a weeping eye, if you craned from a clicked-up window on the right side of the train, the silver cincture of the Passamint River glittered full into view, and beyond it the red and white toy-box town set in its nest of green.

But the first you really saw of Tupton was the Jail. The further shore of the Passamint lifted an abrupt embankment crowned by old Court Street, and on the other side of old Court Street rose that high, brown, barred bastille. Churlishly it faced inward toward the town, its back to the river.

Nearer, as the train rumbled on the high trestled bridge, the eye overlooked Courthouse Square down Monument Street. Then, with a steady clanging from the engine's bell, the train slowed past Wilder's farm and the Poplar Street crossing, brazenly tolling its way through the heart of Tupton and past a solid block of old-fashioned red brick residences, upright as prim old ladies in lace and mitts, the cushioned stone stoops below their Corinthian-pilastered doorways set back from a clean and wide brick walk.

But if you watched Tupton approach from a window on the left-hand side of the train, no such portent as the Jail suddenly stabbed you in the eye. Beyond the silver eddies of the Passamint, there bending south and running west, slept the green pastures and the red and cream buildings of The Three Farms—Cripps', beyond the weeping wil-

lows on the river-bank, Sayres', with the flashing weather-cock of a running horse, Wilder's furthest off; beyond them all the dim roofs of residences on Popular and Sycamore.

Northwest also rose the Hill, the yellow roof of the Institute gleaming over the trees behind the Axter Road; east of it the Hyde place with its strange Gothic tower, between them Judge Lindon's old mansion, white and sprawled. And for backdrop of the scene the pale spires of smoke from The Works still further north seemed phantom fingers weaving a perspicuous curtain of faint lemon and violet, that floated and veiled the further valley.

Thus the first two views of Tupton. The tracks of the Meldon Valley Railroad cleft the town in two like a sword.

The first settlers of that part of Pennsylvania were Scotch-Irish and German. The Scotch-Irish were bitterish Presbyterians. Isaiah Scott, Prothonotary of Meldon County, had entertained greasy Tuscarora and Shawnee sachems at dinner in the courthouse in Tupton's early years, dispensing cider and wine. Wolves from the lower slopes of the Blue Ridge had howled around the frontier town. As far back as 1760 a worthy settler named Ephraiam Axter had received by patent some three hundred acres that became known as Quarry Hill. That part of the country was found to be fairly rich in areas of iron ores and limestone. This Axter had later purchased three ore banks in North Mountain. He then took out a patent for some sixteen hundred acres including the land between the ore banks. Such was the rise of the present Meldon Iron Works that constituted the largest industry near Tupton. Far back a certain shrewd Adolphus Hyde had become sole owner.

Yet in spite of its iron works, Tupton had remained fairly obscure, while the town of Barrack Falls further north and the real shipping point for Hyde's manufactured iron had grown into a cheap, blatant, noisy young metropolis. Meanwhile the descendants of the original Scotch-Irish and German families of Tupton, with a strong infusion of Eng-

lish stock, had replenished the earth in conservatism and strong provincial pride.

The town was small, the principal families traced back to the Revolution. Southeast of the town was a negro settlement in the region locally known as the Bottom. The principal residence section was now on the Northwest side of Market Street, along which ran the somewhat antiquated rolling-stock of the Meldon Railroad. Here Poplar, Sycamore and Ivy ran northwest from Market in parallel maple and chestnut-shaded lines. Market was some ninety feet wide, Poplar, Sycamore and Ivy at least sixty. Northeast of The Old Residence Block on the opposite side of Market was the Railroad Station. On this side of town Laurel Street ran straight north from the stone-parapeted vehicle bridge over the Passamint, to turn northeast across Oak, Elm, and Willow at the intersection of Oak and Monument. The large and ancient Presbyterian Church occupied a tree-shaded green at this point. The lane to the Bottom meandered off downhill from a point southeast of the church. On both sides, between the old residence block and the station, Market Street was lined with quite modern stores. There were other stores along Monument and Laurel. There was also a Memorial Library, and there was the historic Tupton Institute, which had never had more than one hundred pupils. The latter was a semi-colonial structure, with a yellow roof and a monstrosity of a cupola. It looked down upon the chief residence district of Tupton from the lower slope of The Hill.

Within the last twenty-five years a change had gradually come upon the town. Certain newer tradespeople had prospered. The descendants of more ancient tradespeople looked upon their inevitable advance in social standing with perplexity and suspicion. Manners had changed also, strange opinions were often heard in certain quarters. Deference to family and professional standing was felt to be going by the board.

That, at least, was the undercurrent of much of the con-

versation in the Old Residence Block. The families of the Old Residence Block were intimate with each other since childhood. They comprised, on Market Street, the Brattles, the Corneliuses, the Jeremiah Mixters, the Uttersons, the Adolphus Frazees. In their high-stoooped brick residences they formed the thin red line of Tupton's defence, the front line. Separated from them only by adjoining rear lawns, trim garden paths, berry bushes and, in several instances, a tall shady chestnut encircled near its base by a green wooden seat, the six corresponding residences on Monument Street might have been called the second line. Flanking these were the three houses facing Oak and the three facing Larch, namely the Burleys, the Syles, the Reynolds; the MacConliss's, the Vrooms, the Webbers. Against the invasion of questionable taste, odd manners, unconventionality, any new ideas, the old Residence Block presented a compactness of resistance comparable, in a military sense, only to that of the old-time British Square.

In the Old Residence Block life was primarily a matter of ritual. It still proceeded with a leisurely decorum. It acknowledged without unseemly question the pre-eminence of its fathers' gods. Whether this was manifested in the perpetual asseveration of Mr. Utterson, the retired lawyer, that "You will never change human nature, sir!" or in the exasperation of Jeremiah Mixer with the successes of woman suffrage; with Adolphus Frazee, the Railroad Official's staunch Republicanism and implacable hatred of Woodrow Wilson, with old General Brattle's passionate militarism or Dr. John Cornelius's impending apoplexy at any mention of a world-state, the governing principles remained the same.

True, the Monument Street phalanx was perhaps weakened by the presence of the young Harry Persons and the temperamental Rebecca Stone, but, after all, these younger folk were saplings of the same soil, seeded from equally venerable family trees. And they were insulated respectively, to mix a metaphor, by the Miss Babbitts and the Cravens, by Alexander Pennyfeather and Miss Sophia

Crome. Besides, Harry Persons was a trusted protégé of Cephas Hyde, present lord of the Hill; the temperamental Rebecca Stone's great-grandfather had raised the Meldon Fencibles and his Revolutionary sword still hung in the hall. "These young people under our wing," as old General Brattle had been heard to refer to them with leonine rumbling, "are, after all,—ahem!—sound to the core." They were therefore generously permitted a somewhat lighter attitude toward life, they were indulged in a few harmless heresies.

It did not even matter that Rebecca Stone was known to peruse both Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, and sometimes quoted openly and without shame from Bernard Shaw. True, at the very beginning of the war she had announced herself a pacifist, thereby giving General Brattle one of the shocks of his life, but she had shown her mettle eventually, having probably made more Red Cross bandages than any other woman in Tupton. True it irritated Adolphus Frazee that she seemed, in spite of everything, still to admire Wilson; it rubbed Dr. John Cornelius decidedly the wrong way that she would not admit the League of Nations to be the abhorrent sham he considered it. Nevertheless, she remained a Stone.

So the Ten of Tupton, despite immaterial inner differences, stood foursquare to every changing wind of doctrine. Within their portière'd drawing-rooms and behind their bowed green and white wooden shutters they conserved the aristocratic social principle. By their edict alone all real amenities in intercourse with the other less fortunate inhabitants of the town were fostered and perpetuated. The smoke of their chimneys spiring bluely upward through the hushed evening must have been a delicious incense in the nostrils of the Most High.

They bowed the knee in two temples only, both gleaming sepulchrally white from the triangular Green faced by the houses on Monument Street. There the First Presbyterian and the Protestant Episcopal churches stood side by side. Between these two denominations there had existed feuds

of old. To-day, however, in face of the invasion of "these tradespeople", all differences had been buried. The old residents were the principal pew-holders in both edifices, the largest donators in both to the salary of minister and rector and to the weekly collections, the staunch backbone of customary observance. Hardly one Sunday of the year saw any one of them missing from their ancient seats. To the devout in Tupton, and there were many, this was a continual source of edification and self-congratulation. With such a solid phalanx of respectability their rooted centre, they need certainly never fear for the moral tone of their town.

But there were also, alas, the outliers. Take Arthur Pollock, for instance. While he held, unquestionably, the regard of the first families and also came of old stock, he resided on Sycamore Street. His Emporium was certainly nothing against him. His fathers had founded it. As a general store it was rooted in the memory of all the old inhabitants. Pollock was also a Republican in sympathy, though not what could ever satisfy the high principles of Adolphus Frazee as a wholly loyal party man. He was too subject to eccentric outbursts of irascibility against what he denounced as "peculation" and "outrageous imbecility in office". This was applied principally, it must be admitted, to officials in the State capitol.

But then Pollock was a thorn in the flesh of those who sought to conserve that high tradition of manners dating from the period of the Civil War. Pollock was sometimes too outspoken, too brusque, too careless of the conventions. Certain of his stories in mixed gatherings had been thought in questionable taste. He lacked respect for a number of criteria of conduct essentially sacred to the Ten. He had upon occasion proved too rude and boisterous. This at least was the opinion of the women who upheld the social standards of the inner citadel, and their men, with a secret somewhat lugubrious regard for Pollock, outwardly at least concurred. At stag gatherings they greeted him more

genially, but theirs after all was not the ball and sceptre of social office.

And if Arthur Pollock was an outlier, how much more so his brother-in-law, Dr. Charles Gedney. He was the recluse of the town. He had married one of the Cripps girls, as Martha, his late wife, was still referred to by some, an odd, saturnine woman who had experienced, it seemed, more than her share of family tragedy. She had not sought to mingle with the elect of the town, and, to tell the truth, after a few vague first advances, had not been sought after. Before the death of Arthur Pollock's wife these two families had kept a good deal to themselves. Twenty years ago the Gedney's eldest daughter, Gertrude, had disappeared from home and had never been heard from since. It had been the nine-days' wonder of the time.

To-day the relicts of both the House of Pollock and the House of Gedney were still asked to the various Tupton entertainments. They were not unkindly discussed by the arbiters of taste. The men were greeted by their first names by the men of the Ten. Dr. Gedney had, after all, been for many years one of the bulwarks of the Institute whither the few scions of the Ten had repaired for their earlier education before departing for boarding-school or college. But he and his wife had seemed to hide themselves away. After his daughter's disappearance and his wife's later death his younger growing adopted daughter came only gradually within cognizance of the first families.

Then Bessie Cripps Gedney, orphaned child of Martha's brother, had formed school friendships with young Betty Cornelius and young Laura Brattle. Mrs. Brattle and Mrs. Cornelius found her a well-behaved young person. They politely permitted the friendship. It remained in both cases, however, tinged with formality.

Aside from the outliers—and others who should be mentioned were the James Battells (whose home a Mrs. Ventress from New York had just rented for the summer), not to say Mrs. Ralph Harris the stoic of Sycamore Street, now,

last remaining evidence of her scattered family, her boys being prominent elsewhere in politics and industry—most of the underlings and tradespeople lived on the wrong side of town (in the Ten's opinion, at least,) infesting Ivy, Sycamore, and Poplar Streets, where both Arthur Pollock and Doctor Gedney happened to be so unfortunately situated. Moreover, the new mercantile class whose invasion the Old Residence Block so patricianly resisted, had, in many instances, blossomed forth with pleasant brand-new houses set in their own comfortable gardens. They had brought the raucous Victrola and the ubiquitous Ford to Tupton. Their young people formed their own chattering society. Some of them chewed gum, most of them indulged in slang, many of them forced their way into the hallowed Institute to receive their education.

They permeated the town like a not yet virulent pestilence. They quickened its life with the cheap and noisy. Their fathers made money and instituted new places of amusement, like turning the old Fair Grounds into a Midway Park, like starting the Star Theatre, a moving-picture "palace" on Willow Street, like proclaiming a new young people's tennis club beyond Ivy Street. Was not the dignified if dilapidated tan-bark court under the weeping willow trees in a corner of the Institute Grounds enough in all conscience? These young people in the summer buzzed about Tupton in white flannel trousers, and striped sport skirts, in sport shirts, sneakers, and georgette blouses, to the scandalisation by fits of giggles and gawkish horseplay of the sedate older residents. They went often on unchaperoned picnics into the country, and they danced eternally on their porches to the most rackety music. They destroyed the evening hush of the streets and their observance of the Sabbath was a disgrace—or rather, their lack of observance. So much, then, for the patricians and the *hoi polloi*.

CHAPTER VI: UNCLE ARTHUR THINKS NOTHING OF IT

I THINK *nothing* of it!" said Uncle Arthur Pollock stoutly, rising slightly on his toes as he stood braced before the empty fireplace. He thrust out his lower lip in a way that made his chin recede. His sack suit (in much need of pressing) was dark blue with the faintest thread of red in it. It had been made to order. Uncle Arthur's clothes *had* to be made to order. Across one of the gray corduroy waistcoats he affected ran a heavy red-gold watch-chain.

He was huge. He had a scar that ran across his left cheek from under the eye over to opposite the lobe of the ear. He had large stick-out oyster-shaped ears that were always fiery-red and gave an aggressive, attentive aspect to his face. He had a wide mouth drooping at the corners. His countenance was ruddy and round. His sandy hair was thinned and fragile, yet stood up with remarkable wiriness across the arc of his pate, from ear to ear. His mustache was sandy, brief and irregular as if bitten. One eyebrow was perpetually higher than the other and the eye under it slightly bloodshot and strained. For Uncle Arthur was astigmatic and would not admit it. He also would not wear glasses. He thought *nothing* of them. That was his favourite expression.

You may be surprised and a bit perturbed by Uncle Arthur. All I can say is that he did really have that effect upon people. He wore his clothes baggily, yet they were never old clothes. He had partially retired from business, but still kept a watchful eye on his famous store, a drygoods store, the oldest and largest in Tupton. He had not got his scar shooting wildebeeste or struggling with catamounts

on the brinks of terrific precipices. He had got it by falling downstairs at the age of thirty-seven and hitting his face on a brass stair-tread. It had cut his face open and he had been in bed for two months. Partly shock and partly because Uncle Arthur was a person who liked to be petted while he damned it. Nowadays he spent most of his time thinking *nothing* of it and watching the hennery life of some gamecocks he kept in a wired enclosure in his back-yard on Poplar Street, though he paid a visit to the store every day also. His house on Poplar Street was an enormous affair, the oldest house in Tupton. It was full of glass cases of stuffed things, birds, small animals, even reptiles—stuffed. Cases of butterflies. That is, those were in the library and drawing-room on the lower floor.

Dr. Gedney, who sat regarding his brother-in-law, was a man of about fifty-five, Uncle Arthur's age. He was as neat as wax. Black clothes, a black bow tie, very white linen, a prominent nose long and earnest, and small, black eyes that bored like gimlets. Pronounced chin and a high white forehead. Black hair—a black mustache.

There was a pervasive eccentricity about Uncle Arthur and a sort of sunset glow. His spasmodic irascibility and overwhelming scorn of most ideas hardly mitigated this effect. They only made the sunset somewhat stormy. But the black and white of Dr. Gedney—for his countenance was of a fine clear pallor accentuated by jetty mustache and hair—conferred more true restfulness, if more astringency. Where Uncle Arthur's presence was pervasive but ambiguous, Dr. Gedney's had the compactness and accentuation of an exclamation point and the frosty stillness of a winter's night. His lips were thinly chiselled—his teeth white and regular—where Uncle Arthur's were extraordinarily crooked and coloured like old ivory. Till he spoke you would have taken Dr. Gedney for a man of infinite determination. When he did speak, however, his voice had the still-born quality of the utterance of a very shy man who talks little and only to his intimates. It rustled dry and un-

certainly. His eyes changed when he spoke. They dimmed. They dreamed. When roused, however, he became astonishingly staccato.

"Now, Arthur," said Dr. Gedney. "Don't adopt that insufferable attitude. There isn't the slightest reason to suppose——."

Uncle Arthur unexpectedly flung a large blue and white handkerchief from some bulge of his person and snorted into it. His slightly bulbous nose became even redder.

"—— *nothing* of it!" said Uncle Arthur from behind his handkerchief. "Positively nothing!"

Bessie had been watching all this from the ottoman in front of a book-case on the opposite side of the room, the book-case that had the big luggable books in it. She was also looking at the illustrations of Le Sage's "Gil Blas". She would look and then watch. She wondered what Uncle Arthur was "nothing"ing about this time. Her mind was not on her elders. A thin sunbrowned child of sixteen, black hair still tied behind with a dark blue ribbon. A cross-barred blue gingham dress. Black stockings and sandals. Large dark eyes with long lashes, elfishly bright. A slightly uptilted nose, a short upper lip and a mouth the colour and texture of a roseleaf. Very much the amusing child still, in many ways, but with a mind of her own.

All that there were of the Gedneys now—the Doctor and Bessie—and Bessie was really a Cripps. Then there was Annie, in the kitchen, cook, housemaid and nurse of old.

"There isn't the slightest reason to suppose," went on Dr. Gedney, in his rusty voice, "that this Mrs. Ventress could possibly be a bad influence upon anybody. The drawings Bessie has shown me are excellent, I think, and she is most interested. I think my plan an admirable one."

Bessie was not listening.

"At your age!" puffed Uncle Arthur, for answer. "Don't fool yourself, Charley!"

"Arthur," said the Doctor in an even fainter voice than

before, "I had thought better of your intelligence. Well, we'll talk about something else."

In the pause that followed, Bessie heard the hall clock ticking. She realised that this murmuring on the part of her adopted father and explosiveness on the part of her uncle must have been just another of the only semi-intelligible wrangles between older people. It touched her consciousness only as blurry noise that distracted her a little from contemplation of the pictures. Her father and her uncle were always arguing something—usually something that seemed to her incredibly uninteresting. Meanwhile Dr. Gedney, rising to get his briar pipe from the table, discovered her presence.

"Doing, Bessie?" he asked.

"A—ah," Bessie exhaled in a soft sigh.

"Reading," with a comfortable unction.

"'Gil Blas'," said the Doctor, looking. "Too old for you." To him she remained about eight years old.

"Fun," returned Bessie succinctly.

"Damn—excuse me," said the Doctor stumbling on the rug. "Where's my pipe?"

"On the Bible," said Bessie without looking up. She turned a page.

The Doctor refilled his pipe at the green bowl on the table and made some pother about getting it to draw. Bessie, regarding him from behind his back, thought him a straight and nice-looking father. She felt sorry for him, in the way all women do.

Uncle Arthur was running his large hands through his hair. He felt somewhat put upon by the discovery of Bessie. Nevertheless——.

"Phryne has four chicks, Bess!" he boomed.

"Oh, *no!*" said Bessie, raising a flushed beaming countenance from the estimation of a wood-cut. "Oh, I *must* see them!"

Outside the house the late spring afternoon was still bright. The low-ceilinged long brown room, with its two

book-cluttered tables and its walls of glass-doored book-cases, was mellowed with late light. Uncle Arthur, before the empty fireplace, seemed a romantic, somewhat Falstaffian figure.

"To-morrow," he announced, "come round in the morning. They're in the brood coop. I must go. Charley, *do not be a fool*. I've told you my reasons."

He glared, yet with a certain benignancy, upon Dr. Gedney.

"Oh, it's settled," said the Doctor's wispy voice that so belied his authoritative face. "But you'll see."

"Well—great hippopotami!" ejaculated Uncle Arthur despairingly, and departed with rolling gait from the room. In the hall and before the hall-door slammed, Bessie heard him conclude with superb abnegation,

"As for me—I utterly refuse to be a party to it. I repeat that I think absolutely *nothing* of it—nothing whatever!"

CHAPTER VII: BESSIE, SOLUS

THE design, topped by two reclining cupids who supported a medallion with plump shoulders and faced outwards to confront two balancing butterflies, enclosed what looked like a black slate. On it, in white lettering, stood the words:

HERE
IS INTERRED
THE SOUL
OF THE LICENTiate
PETER GARCias

This volume of the picaresque adventures of the Sage of Santillane was Smollett's translation illustrated by Jean Gigoux. The book was backed with tooled almost olive green leather. It had leather corners. Its boards were covered inside and out with that streaked paper used for legal volumes, looking as if bands of color had run on a stained glass pane and congealed in irregular layers of drops. Blue, yellow and green, on an ox-blood foundation.

Aqui est a encerranda et alma del Pedro Garcias! Bessie pondered the finding of the hundred ducats in the leathern purse under the tombstone. One hundred ducats—the soul of the Licentiate! Yet the adventures were said to contain “moral instructions.” The idea that Alain René Le Sage had also made a paraphrastic translation of the Letters of Aristenetus delighted her. She had such a wholly dim and glamorous idea of what it might all be about. “The Devil on Two Sticks.” That was another name that intrigued her. Le Sage's character was said to have been “truly amiable”. This pleased her especially. She smiled to herself.

At the top of Book IV an engraving of Gil Blas reclining on a couch and reading in a long-paged narrow book was, to her mind, extremely well drawn. His face, with its sparse square beard and aristocratic mustache, his romantic cambric shirt with open collar and deep rolled-back cuffs, became, as she gazed, the very face and habiliments of her Ideal. The hands were well-treated, the left especially, in a position that showed the draughtsman's knowledge of anatomy. On the other hand, how monstrously insipid was the picture of the jade Laura on the page preceding! What an idiot mouth. If *that* were a coquette! She was so much more convincing in the thumbnail panel, the various faces of her "crowd of relations" so amusing. But living with the seven deadly sins must, somehow, have been quite too treacly. Gil Blas had surely exhibited his good sense by revolting from it.

The pages of the book were rough and yellowed, and the queer pictures seemed rooted in the text. In modern books they were so detached, so unlike the people one imagined. These seemed to fit better, even at their worst. How many initial letters, tailpieces, thumbnail decorations and vignettes there were! That seemed the only way a book *should* be illustrated—in some such apparently impromptu fashion. The "go-to," formal sort of pictures, were the worst; posy, attitudinizing, simpering, losing all grace and motion of line, hard and wooden. That sketch of the horrible face of the crone Leonarda on page fifty-eight, just a bare outline, but worth a hundred Spencerian-haired Lauras. That was it, such drawing was like those flourishy eagles with sheaves of arrows in their claws that went with advertisements of courses in "expert penmanship." Ugh! How she hated Spencerian handwriting!

Bessie suddenly raised her eyes from the page and wondered what Uncle Arthur's "reasons" had been. They must have been divulged before her wraithlike entry into the living room. She came even farther awake from the book upon her knee and her fascination with its illustrations.

What was her father's plan? Was he going to do what she asked? She shoved the big leather-backed book into its opening in the shelf and remained on her knees for a moment, thinking. Then she dusted her hands, scrambled up, and went slimly into the hall, arms at sides, thin hands pointing slightly behind her. She tilted on her toes and peered. There was no one in the rather dim hall. Her father had gone into his study (which should have been the parlor) on the other side of the newel-posted stair-foot. There he would be refilling his pipe from the hammered brass bowl at the large table. He would be doing it by the open window that looked out on the side yard where the leaves of the apple-tree glittered in the six o'clock sunlight.

The hall was dim and somewhat dingy. Bessie climbed the stairs. Oh, that was it—of course! Uncle Arthur didn't want Mrs. Ventress to teach her drawing. She wondered again as to his "reasons".

Bessie's room had a marble mantelpiece over a now empty coal grate. The China Animals were its chief feature. These were mainly an array of those fascinating families one could procure some twenty years ago in small brown paste-board boxes stuffed with cotton. They had been bequeathed her by her cousin, Slade Breckinridge, an editor on the *Colosseum Magazine* in New York. Slade's typhoid at the age of six, when he had lost his curls and the gnome-like voice of his emaciated convalescence had croaked at his mother, "Pack boxes!"—was the primary association these tiny purplish spaniels, bears and deer evoked. Bessie had been told it many times by Aunt Sally. Then there was the "gentle face" dog (first *g* hard, as in gutter). He had abided with sundry chippings and regluing from the same precarious past. There were the See, Hear and Speak-No-Evil Monkeys, in their bright jackets, given her by Slade on his return from that trip to San Francisco. There was Eunice, the china cow, forever at grazing gaze with a slight cast in her eye and one foreleg gone at the knee. Eunice had an incision in her back. She was a bank. The Chinaness of the

Animals gleamed across Bessie's bedroom. Dimity curtains fluttered at her window. The woolly brown hearthrug under the black tin shield of the grate was often a seat more favoured than either the cretonned wicker basket-chair or the gray corduroy cushioned window-seat. She dove now for the hearthrug and sat quiet upon it, in the dusk, under the China Animals, nursing her knees.

She breathed a name all to herself, after a moment. Her thoughts were in another house entirely. Her expression was dreamy and benign. "*Adela!*" said Bessie. "*Adela!*" And then, with enormous satisfaction, "I simply didn't know there *were* such people!" There was a pleasant sympathetic silence. Bessie cupped her chin in both palms. "She gives you the impression," pronounced the young pythoness solemnly and finally, "of—of a great unhappy grandeur!"

But even by this last remark the China Animals seemed to remain quite unimpressed.

CHAPTER VIII: "THE GIRL WHO WAS BURNED UP"

DR. GEDNEY did not practice medicine. He had been an instructor at the Tupton Institute. Now he had relapsed into doing nothing much, so far as Tupton could discover. He had written several school-books. He was now engaged, it was rumoured, upon a history of Meldon County. His father had been old Judge Gedney of the Circuit Court. Dr. Gedney himself had a Litt.D. from a small New England college.

His wife's death had driven a naturally recluse temperament even more in upon itself, that and the loss of his daughter. Yet there were those who let it be understood that they considered him better off since his wife had died. "She was certainly very peculiar," Mrs. Harris, the stoic of Sycamore Street, would often allow, folding stout, work-creased hands in her ample lap. Mrs. Harris spoke little and was rarely moved toward censure. She knew what she knew about life, but she kept it mostly to herself. She irradiated benignancy. Hers was a strong character that had endured much without embitterment. But when she said that about Mrs. Gedney, now fifteen years deceased, her eyes narrowed a little and her mouth was firm.

Miss Sophia Crome, whose house was the last in the Old Residence Block at the corner of Monument and Oak, was of the opposite opinion. But then Miss Crome would doubtless have found the personality of John Calvin wholly charming. She was a relic—was Miss Crome. At least, that was what Uncle Arthur called her: "That relic!" He never got any farther in his description. It was Miss Crome's opinion that Mrs. Gedney had been "a most upright

woman". She said that with an unctuous pursing of dry lips. Her steel spectacles glimmered like the eyes of a cat as she said it.

As for Dr. Gedney, he rarely saw any neighbours. He read, wrote, or pottered about his yard during the day. He read with or without Bessie at home in the evenings. He and Bessie usually had dinner at the Pollocks' once a week. Several times a week he and Uncle Arthur would play checkers together, visiting each other's homes. But most of his life was submerged in that other life afforded by books. He read chiefly philosophy and history (pastimes unbewildering, even fascinating, to his retentive memory and analytical mind). Contemporary affairs, the affairs of the town of Tupton, made little impression upon him. He poked his pipe full of rather rank tobacco, with one long, lean forefinger, and went on reading.

Bessie went in and out of his house as she listed. He usually knew why she was out—at school, at the gymnasium, at the library, at the Brattles, at the Corneliuses. It was one of those places. She was a dear child, dark and quiet and quite fond of reading. With a head in the air of her own. No need to worry about her. Arthur worried entirely too much. Arthur was so fussy. Fussiness ran in that family. Dr. Gedney smiled a sad, haunted smile. Ineffably silly of Arthur, this last business. . . .

Bessie's father was sitting in a large leather chair by the window. The seams of the back of it had burst and the black horsehair stuffing was apparent. He arose now, in his absent-minded way, and went over to his desk by the south wall. After some fumbling he produced from a side-drawer an oblong box of unpainted tin. There was more fumbling with his key-ring, which he wore at the end of his watch-chain instead of a watch. His watch he always carried without fob or other attachment in his upper vest-pocket on the right-hand side. That was typical. Yet he had not broken the crystal once in ten years. That also was typical. He was an unhandy man though. The key stuck in the lock

of the box and he made some pother getting it open. He kept saying something softly under his breath. As a matter of record the words were, "Oh, dear, oh, dear. . . ." They were his habitual method of expression of his sense of minor annoyances.

In the box, with some other papers, was a small packet secured by a rubber band. Beside this band were traces of another, dark vestiges of rubber. The packet had at one time been put away for a long period. The paper in the packet proved somewhat discoloured and faded as Dr. Gedney unfolded it. He removed the outer sheet and spread it out upon his knee. It was the first picture she had ever drawn.

Three remarkable individuals could be distinguished in the foreground. The hat of one floated in a detached manner half an inch above its head. The arms and legs were excessively spidery. The hands were equipped with at least ten skeleton fingers arranged like rays. The faces of the figures were noseless and their eyes and mouths were large wobbly circles. This gave them an aspect of breathless surprise. Their hair was a voluminous huddle of scratchy lines. To their left a house half their height and even narrower than any one bulging body blazed merrily with carmine water-color flames. In the midst of it stood "The Girl Who Was Burned Up". She was twice as tall as the house and bore a certain weird facial resemblance to a cat. Her writhing mien expressed considerable discomfort. This effort at art was entitled "The Flight of the Family". The printing necessary to display the slogan properly wandered all over the bottom half of the large sheet of ruled tablet paper. The printed letters were enormous and askew.

Dr Gedney had seated himself with the tin box in his lap. He studied the picture without smiling. His eyes wandered from it and came to rest on a large framed photograph in the shadow of the southeast corner of the room. It had been done by that man in Barrack Falls.

Gertrude had looked nothing like her. It was astonishing

that any mother and daughter could have so little resembled each other. Martha had always taken a good photograph. The querulous lines about the mouth had been retouched away in the photograph. The hard glint in the eyes was not apparent. The bearing of the sitter possessed dignity. The thin aquiline nose alone gave indication in its curve of nostril of that remorseless, accipitrine will. Yet the mouth was smiling a little. The pose was placid. Martha's figure had always been rather graceful. Her head, with its now absurdly out-of-date bonnet, was held high. Her burnt-umber hair had its decided fluffiness. Her large hands clutched each other in her lap. It was an example of photography before the days of softening artistic shadows and blurred outlines and backgrounds. Simply a likeness. A very good likeness—in everything but the essentials of character. A proud and resolute woman, you would have said, but possessed also of wisdom and kindness. That was how most of them had seen her, he supposed. Yes, he supposed so.

It was strange about Martha. Martha had always acted from the first as if, if he had not actually ever been unfaithful to her, he were, nevertheless, always upon the verge of being so. This attitude was implicit. It had been conveyed for many years by an accumulation of eyebrow-raising, acrid half-sentences, slight shrugs, impatient sighs, hours of taciturn surveillance. It had been emphasized by furious unexplained tearfulness that ceased as swiftly as it came, typhoons of unreasonableness that whirled and passed. Completely erased, so far as Martha was concerned, but not from his own consciousness. Phenomena of woman nature. These exhibitions did not occur, either, at those times when all women are overwrought and strange to themselves. They were not the result of illness or poor health. They were simply habitual. In self-defense, Dr. Gedney had come to disregard them entirely. He could never hope to unravel the devious tangle of reasoning—or was it merely perverted instinct—which precipitated them upon him. He had tried

to analyze in the earlier days, to explain Martha to herself. A disastrous idea! Then he had tried to discover in himself the faults and shortcomings that might account for Martha's suspicions. He had tried to remedy them. But he groped in the dark.

Yet, in tender moments that constantly grew fewer, she softened and became again some likeness of the girl he had loved, standing under the peach-trees of her father's farm. She was again, fleetingly, the kind-eyed person in whose voice he could never have imagined that harsh querulousness, in whose heart he would never have thought of suspecting that self-consuming frenzy of jealousy. Here also was no matter of spirit fighting body and agonising a delicately-adjusted soul between two intense passions. Dr. Gedney had always exercised punctilious consideration toward his wife. Martha cared little for the pleasures of the mind. She was a regular church-goer. She was regular in the conventional duties of housekeeping. But from the first moment she had entered their new home she had commenced a frustrated brooding. She made few friends. In the early days she had seemed ardent. He had loved her, certainly, both with passion and devotion. But gradually she had revealed herself in intimacy as what he came to privately call "a secret woman." She read little and soon lost interest in his study and teaching, save as the means which procured them their livelihood. She allowed its claims up to a certain point. But if, in scholarly absorption, he transgressed the tacitly-understood time-limit of devotion to these matters by so much as fifteen minutes, there was always imminence of hurricane. His natural absent-mindedness had fought against him in this regard for years. He had striven to conquer it. How faint the victory had been was shown by the fact that after her death he had easily relapsed into his old bookwormish habits. Yet that very absent-mindedness had appeared to be one of his peculiar charms to her during their courtship. It was an odd mismating.

It was not excitement or gaiety that she desired. At first

he had actually proved more gregarious than she. But all simple foregatherings became a strain. Afterward a mood he had never understood settled upon her. She looked sideways at him with deep suspicion. She said cutting things that misinterpreted and perverted his innermost thoughts. Such misunderstanding at first aroused chill surprise, then protest. Then came dumbness. How could he ever make her see? There came also, with time, a mechanical deafness to insinuation. An elaborate ritual of forgetting was formulated. It served, finally. It was like repeating a cabalistic sentence. Boiled down, it doubtless seems ridiculously naïve. Its sum and substance were the words, eternally repeated in his thought, "*Pay no attention, pay no attention, pay no attention!*"

The pass to which he came increased his insulation from intuitive contacts with actual life. His absentmindedness had already begun, the instinct for self-preservation had completed the process. Charles Gedney began to move through life like a noctambulist. He also stood in the midst of his married life like Abednego in the furnace. Sometimes the heat of that irradiating jealousy might have shrivelled his soul if he had not refused to be conscious of it. It took such strange forms. He had even known it to obtain to a favourite chair of his, to a stray cat he had fed with milk and kept in the house overnight, to a term's examination papers.

Yet she did not desire a passionate devotion. Not at all. She simply doubted entirely and yet desired entire allegiance. He had never been critical of her thought or action. Mildly remonstrative on occasion, perhaps. But even such mild remonstrances added fuel to the furnace. In one aspect it was supremely pathetic, this coinstantaneous wretchedness, and rage that his every thought could not be completely hers. The many other women she imagined existed only in her imagination. But that made them no less actual to her. And a wildly passionate nature in bond to a narrow, fearful, indiscriminating mind, fashioned brightly burning hell of her peculiar temperament.

Gertrude had been born in a period of comparative peace, though to outward appearances the Gedney household was never otherwise. Gertrude had been loved hungrily by her mother through her earliest years. She was more drawn toward her father. A tragic triangular situation came into being. First it was that her mother occupied the position of slaving for Gertrude, while Gertrude besieged a somewhat disturbed father with endearments. Some premonition told Charles Gedney what might come of his too easy and natural manifestation of parental pleasure. But he came to think that Gertrude had charms to soothe any breast, to obliterate the strained strangeness of past years. Besides, she was too entirely adorable and amusing in her attentions. He remembered the very hour when he had seen his mistake—inevitable perhaps.

It was the story of "The Three Bears". Gertrude had come into his study uninvited and had sidled up to the desk where he was correcting papers about five o'clock of a rainy Sunday afternoon in the Fall. She stood by the side of the desk with her large brown eyes and floppy curls. A flat green book was clutched to her side.

"You will read," she said in her amusingly solemn voice, with its intonation unconsciously imitated from that of her mother, "here." Then she held the book up in front of her face in an embarrassed manner. Then she laughed. Gertrude's early laughter could almost be said to crinkle her hair. It filled the small face with delightful animation. Suddenly she was beside him, clasping him round the arm tightly and burying her curls in his sleeve. She looked up again, mischievously, and began to climb upon his knee. He gave over Latin exercises for the afternoon.

It was half through the story of "The Three Bears" that Martha appeared in the doorway. Though not a particularly thin woman she had a way of looking gaunt upon occasion. She stood in the door Gertrude had left open and regarded the two figures silhouetted against the sunset light of the window. Gertrude was curled in her father's lap.

His head was bent to read properly. It was almost time to light the gas.

"Gertrude, you have disobeyed me," said Martha in a queer, repressed tone.

Gertrude looked up and brushed the brown curls back from her face with a small hand. "Father's readin'!" she said succinctly.

"Gertrude, you have disobeyed me," repeated Martha in that same strained tone. As Charles Gedney peered round his small daughter's shoulder at his wife her eyes actually seemed to him to gleam like a cat's in the gathering shadows of the room. It was an impression he was a long time forgetting. "I'm reading to her," said the husband, his soul suddenly shaken by a strange tremor that he did not like to acknowledge.

"Gertrude, come here," said Mrs. Gedney, as if unaware of the intrusion of his remark.

For answer Gertrude clasped both arms about her father's neck and he felt her whole small body quiver as she snuggled farther into his arms.

"What is the matter, Martha? What is it? What is it, Gertrude?" the confused man asked.

"I am speaking to Gertrude," said his wife. She had moved farther into the room. By the conflagration of the sunset without, which now lit the room with weird brilliance, he suddenly perceived the glittering tears in her eyes. But her features were set in a strange inexorable mould.

"What is the matter?" he said again, uncomfortably. "Won't you explain to me?" Gertrude's head burrowed further into his waistcoat.

"I am speaking to Gertrude," his wife repeated. "If she does not choose to hear me——"

"But what has she done? What is it, Martha? I was just reading her a story. Surely——"

He had made a bad blunder. There was a hint, if only a hint, of aggravation in his tone, but worse than that, there was a hint of partnership in this difference, with Gertrude,

and a suspicion, unbearable to his wife, that he perceived an emotion in her which she had never admitted to herself.

"Is—is this my child or yours?" The voice seemed strained almost to breaking. It was not her ordinary voice. "Gertrude," this strange voice said again, and this time it quavered with a note of hysteria, "Come here—at once!"

"Shan't", vouchsafed Gertrude muffled into her father's watch pocket. But he was sure that only he had heard it.

Suddenly Martha Gedney's face broke into one of those distortions that precede weeping. Her arms shook at her sides. She controlled her features by a violent effort. She turned. With a fierce rustle of her dress she left the room. But not before she had directed at the two a glance the intensity of which Dr. Gedney had never forgotten. Her teeth had showed above her lower lip as her eyes blazed green.

The instant her mother left the room, Gertrude's head had bobbed up. With another shock, Dr. Gedney perceived that she was laughing. His involuntary championship had been for a child in terror. But Gertrude was gay.

"Nice Fa-ther," she said in her rich drawl. "Poo-oor Maw-ther," she added astonishingly. She slipped hastily from his arms and ran out of the room.

The next development had been that, on ascending the stairs, Dr. Gedney had found Gertrude beating at her Mother's locked door with soft calls to her within. There was no response. The questions, and then the entreaties of Dr. Gedney elicited no response either. Finally there came a single harsh, "*Go away!*"

In misery of mind he gave Gertrude her supper and put her to bed. In the same misery and growing fear of what might—though it seemed a nightmarish impossibility—happen behind that locked door, he tried to eat his evening meal, and cursed himself for his nerves. In the midst of the meal he heard a footstep on the stair and his wife walked into the room. Her hair showed no disorder, her eyes no trace of tears, her face was composed though unsmiling. "You can

help me to some of those scrambled eggs,” she remarked in her peremptory manner, unfolding her napkin.

Neither then nor thereafter was the incident of her father’s reading to Gertrude alluded to between them. He read to her afterwards, frequently. But from that moment he perceived the change between mother and daughter. Now it was the small person who had to sue for attention. The indifference of her mother became a permanent silent indictment. And often now the small cheeks burned from the irradiation of the furnace. Nothing was said, everything was implied. After repeated repulses of affection, Gertrude lived through her most bitter moment of deep realisation.

The upshot of it all was that she ran away from home at the age of sixteen, and Tupon had never seen her again. There had been—after a merely formal relation for several years—a most violent difference of opinion with her mother as to the choice of a career. It was a scene Dr. Gedney had come in upon about eight o’clock one July evening, after a visit to the Pollocks—a scene he never sought to remember and hustled from his thought as soon as it began to be visualized. And Martha had accepted Gertrude’s disappearance far more stoically than anyone else in the town. In fact, he had once or twice caught her smiling a strange secret smile to herself. Some years later she had adopted the orphan baby of her brother, George Cripps, whose wife had died several years before he himself had been killed in a railway accident just beyond Barrack Falls. Then, suddenly, after a brief illness, Martha herself had died with stony decision.

* * *

Only a minute or two had elapsed since Dr. Gedney had first taken up the drawing of “The Girl Who Was Burned Up.” He roused himself with a sigh and replaced it in the tin box. He replaced the tin box in the desk drawer. There was Annie’s step in the hall. The door squeaked its usual squeak as she gingerly opened it.

“Supper’s ready, sir.”

"Thank you, Annie. Call Miss Bessie."

But Bessie's own voice said from behind the portly, kindly-faced figure,

"I'm all ready, father."

They sat down in the pleasant dining-room to the blue and white china and the jade bowl on the centerpiece wherein Bessie had just arranged some nasturtiums from the border. Bessie fidgeted a little upon her chair and then broke a raisin bun.

"Uncle Arthur's funny, isn't he?" she ventured with an absent-minded air.

"Eh?" said Doctor Gedney. "Funny? Oh, yes. Arthur is amusing. But irritating, sometimes," he added.

"Why?" said Bessie, round-eyed.

"Why, Bess, I thought that was what you meant. You said he was funny."

"Oh, no, not that way. He doesn't irritate me at least. But he's so—so pishing and pshawing."

The corners of her father's eyes wrinkled with his smile.

"You find that amusing? It is, of course."

"What were his reasons?"

"Reasons for what? Oh, but—why, when were you listening? When did you come in?"

"Oh, *Fa-ther*," Bessie laughed. "You are—you *are* adorable!"

"Adorable? How?"

"Why, I was there all the time. Just quietly. Don't you know I'm always there—quietly?"

"Well I *must* say! Why, of course I don't know it. You shouldn't do that, Bess. What did you hear?"

"Oh, Uncle Arthur pishing and pshawing. Why doesn't he like Mrs. Ventress?"

The question came in a more serious tone. Dr. Gedney regarded his younger daughter—for so she had become to him—with surprised eyes.

"Well, it *was* about that, if you want to know. Of course, Arthur——"

"But I *do* know. He's the funniest thing about women, don't you think? He's so distrustful."

Doctor Gedney looked at her without answering immediately. He remembered Arthur's wife. A faint ironic smile tinged his lips. They were all in the same boat—human beings.

"Arthur, I admit, is rather a misogynist," he said.

"A what?" asked Bessie. "I suppose that means he hates women. Well, he does."

"Not hate them," returned her father, helping himself to another creamed potato. "I don't suppose he does trust them, exactly. Well, his reasons were rather absurd in this case, if you ask me."

"I do. What were they?"

"He simply says we know nothing about Mrs. Ventress, and that I haven't even seen her yet, and that, being a stranger here, she may be anything or anybody, and that she may be a bad influence for you—and—oh, Arthur is rather annoying."

"Amusing," substituted Bessie. "How could he know"—her eyes took on again that far-away expression. "How could he *poss-ibly* know——" She left her sentence unfinished.

"Know what?"

"My dear good angel father," said his daughter, teetering on her chair with some suppressed excitement and waving a creamed potato on her fork as if she were conducting an orchestra, "how could you know either?"

"What on earth do you mean, Bess? Do stop waving that thing. What is it?"

"Mrs. Ventress," intoned Bessie, her eyes sparkling with amusement at her own solemnity of utterance, "is a mythical woman."

"What on earth——? Here, have a bun. What on earth do you mean by that?"

"She is *too* lovely. I simply didn't know there *were* such

people. And, oh, Father, she can draw like a streak," she finished hurriedly.

"Yes, that's what you told me. But I must see her, I suppose. If only to be able to answer Arthur more categorically. *He* never will. Catch him out of his museum or his chicken yards. Yet he comes around and paints this direful portrait——"

"My, and how she has improved that house *already*," exclaimed his daughter, teetering still more before his anxious eyes. "The loveliest blue curtains. Oh, she does look so perfectly *adorable* in that big grey hat when she's weeding. I don't know, I'm sure," Bessie wondered, her eyes blissful and her mouth full of chop, "why she should have taken such a fancy to *me*!"

"Yes, I wonder," returned Dr. Gedney, affectionately ironical. "But you really don't know much about her, Bessie, after all."

"Plenty. She's true-blue. You can tell. And she's so *interesting*. And there is," his daughter's voice filled with genuine gravity, "such a real affinity between us."

"Oh, there is," the Doctor's eyebrows lifted in an amazed way and he laughed suddenly through his nose. "Oh, there is—I must say—well, well is there really?" He recovered his gravity. "Well, Bess, of course I shall have to look into this—but, I dare say you're right, I dare say. Affinity. Well, well. Remarkable. Affinity. Remarkable, I must say."

"It's a perfectly good word," said Bessie, "isn't it?"

"To be sure. Certainly. A perfectly good word. Affinity. My soul. Yes, of course. A perfectly good word."

It was easy enough to see, by the way he looked at her and by the manner of his teasing, that Doctor Gedney quite adored his adopted—and now his only—child. But after sparkling, his eyes dimmed to dreaminess again. Again Gertrude came to him, but this time as the girl of sixteen, the girl of twenty-one years ago. It was almost as if she, instead of Bessie, were sitting on the opposite side of the table,

lifting her napkin. A slight, shadowy figure to be sure, with braided brown hair, and eyes of a thoughtful brown as she lifted them. She had grown up a silent and studious girl who kept her thoughts to herself. She had read much with her father in that household so overshadowed by her mother's strangeness. Demonstrative at first, and flighty in temperament, the growing aloofness and attitude of morose disinterest in her mother had gradually changed her. Her school life became her main interest. She moved about her home intent only upon the books she was studying. Her happiest hours seemed those in her father's study of an evening, when he was outlining to her some epoch of history or helping her with a Latin translation. Then her eyes brightened in a way he loved, and her head tilted more and more on one side in some animated discussion. She kindled to a scene in history or to a beautiful line of verse with charming exclamation and gesture. But at meals or in the library living-room she was almost completely silent under the continual sidewise scrutiny of her mother. What she said then was neither inspired or delighted. She dealt in practical things, ordinary bits of town news, mere requests for things on the table, and departed as soon as possible to her own room on the second floor, from which she would descend later to her father's study.

Dr. Gedney usually sat alone for half an hour or so with his wife after supper. Martha Gedney always had her knitting. The long ivory needles clicked continually. Little was said. There was always a certain amount of distrust in the occasional glances Martha raised. She sat rehearsing inwardly all the things she could never forgive. The dreamy scholar opposite searched his mind for the millionth time or the ways of his offending. Upstairs for this half hour Gertrude was alone with her green-shaded lamp and her scattered papers. She had come to love her own book-cluttered room as a fortress into which she could retire from the atmosphere of the house.

The ticking click of the ivory needles, that long stern face

above them, eyelids dropped as the compressed lips counted. "Spin, spin, Atropos, spin——" The intermittent glitter of raised eyes and raised needles. Again the desolating diligence of dark stitching.

Dr. Gedney would knock out his pipe carefully into the proper receptacle and rise with an embarrassed murmur to his wife. He would cross the room and the hall, closing the door of his study softly behind him. For another half hour or so the three persons in their separate rooms were silent, the two scholars immersed in their books, the third waiting and thinking. With the sound of Gertrude's light step on the stair, Martha Gedney would finally raise her bent head and nod to herself slowly. The signification of a pythia who sees the decree of unjust gods fulfilled. Dr. Gedney had overseen it, without intending to—twice, from the hall.

The ticking click of the ivory needles, knitting time to eternity, knitting his thought to a close-stitched web-work of pain. The desolating diligence of that dark stitching. . . forever and forever. . . .

"Oh, you *funny* father—do pay some attention!" It was Bessie's voice. "You're not eating your baked apple."

"Why—oh, I'm sorry. What is it, Bess?"

"*Are* you going to call on Mrs. Ventress, and tell her—or shall I? I'll see her to-morrow."

"I—why no, I hadn't intended calling just yet. When will you see her? After school?"

"Yes. I'm always passing her house then and she's usually in the garden. Shall I tell her I *can* take drawing lessons?"

"Yes, I think so. Why, yes, I guess so. I must call on her, of course. I suppose so. Why, yes, you can arrange it, can't you, Bess?"

His absent-minded eyes hardly saw her.

"And Uncle Arthur *didn't* have any effect, did he?"

"Arthur? What? Oh, Arthur! Oh, that! Oh, no, Arthur is rather impetuous, you know. Gets these remarkable ideas. I didn't really pay attention to him this afternoon.

He means well, of course. He's very fond of you, Bess. As long as you learn drawing. That's what you want, isn't it? Well—so you really think Mrs. Ventress can help you?"

"Ch, you *remarkable* father! Was anyone ever so way off in space. Why, you saw those drawings of hers. Don't you remember?"

"Of course. Yes, of course. So I did. I told Arthur about them, in fact. Didn't I? Well, you'll see her tomorrow. Fix it up."

He had finished his coffee and rose, a rapier-like figure in black and white, despite his scholar's stoop. He smiled benignly in the general direction of Bessie, and turned toward the living-room.

CHAPTER IX: ORDEAL

THE Battell place stood at the intersection of the Axter Road and the Farm Road beyond Wilder's. The Axter Road, paralleling Tupton's Market Street, ran on past the Battell place and more recently built bungalows or more pretentious houses to the County line. It was unmacadamed, but well kept, lined with tall and beautiful trees. The houses were set back from it with lawns and low hedges.

Architecturally the Battell place had no claims to beauty. It was gambrel-roofed with three projecting second story windows in front that gave it an appearance somewhat snail-eyed. A north wing had been tacked on which entirely destroyed whatever original symmetry it may have had. A porch projected to the west, a very pleasant place to spend the morning sewing, but having nothing at all to do with mass values. It was a wooden house, and therefore a mythological sort of edifice in times like these. It had a delightful small apple-orchard behind it, a high box hedge all around, pleasant flower beds and a broad white gravel path leading up to it. It had, I fear, a good deal of unnecessary gimcrackery about its trimmings. It had originally—loathsome thought—been painted maroon. Now it was white with cream facings, and that helped a little. It was a stiff and antique house with what seemed a pleasanter smile than formerly.

Inside the staircase climbed too rigidly and turned too abruptly, but time had given it the tone of old oak and its carpet, its wall on the left, and the rear wall on the landing repeated the pleasing blue of the hall. A short window-seat had been built below the too-narrow window on the landing. The effect was cramped but rather quaint. An atrocious

chandelier had, however, been removed from the lower hall ceiling. By squinting upward you could but barely mark the slight scar it had left on the creamy surface.

Mrs. Ventress had done little "making over" of the house, hers being such a short period of occupancy. But her eye for harmonizing colour was excellent and she had improved certain details.

To-day she stood near the hedge about her front lawn, with clippers poised in her hand. On the other side of the hedge and up the white, hot Axter Road, proceeded an abundant coloured woman with a laundry basket on her head. Her shuffling footsteps came nearer. She stopped suddenly, put down the basket, and, with arms akimbo, spoke over her shoulder:

"C'mon now, Jazz! C'mon, baby! Else ah gwine leave yuh. Nobuddy ain' gwine huht yuh, Jazz. C'mon, baby. Don' ack so carntakerous."

Mrs. Ventress, in her wide floppy hat, peered to see what person had evoked this deluge of ejaculation. Some twenty yards back on the white road she espied the cause of it. A large black cat was sitting on the crown of the road washing its paws with its tongue.

Suddenly it looked up, licked its whiskers in a sly fashion and then came flexuously bounding toward the coloured woman, tail held erect. Ten yards off it as suddenly stopped again and resumed a sedentary paw-washing.

"C'mon now, Ja-azz," complained the laundress with a rich intonation, rolling the cat's name forth with unction. "Yuh do beat Hell. C'mon, baby. Ain't no one gwine huht yuh."

She was aware of Mrs. Ventress's light laughter from across the hedge. She faced it with a sudden sunrise grin of domino teeth. "Ay-yah," she chuckled wheezily, "ain't dat cat a caution. Ah'll say she is." She stooped to resume her burden, then straightened. "Youse Miss Ventress, ainch. Raickon dis yoh landry. Wait, ah'll bring it in."

"That's a very modern name you've got for your cat," said Adela from behind the hedge.

"Yas'm. Cat's name Jazzbell, out de Bible. Ise Mefdis Pisk mahseff. Wait hyah, I'll tote dis up'n yoh po'ch. Well, say, dat's some wash."

The heavily laden wicker basket scraped on the boards under the wistaria vine.

"You're Dinah White, aren't you?" Mrs. Ventress asked, coming across the grass.

"Yas'm. Ise Dinah. Gotta lotta linen ainch?" The broad face beamed. "You wan't in, time I got it las' Monday."

"No, I had gone down street to get one or two things."

"Yas'm. Rele nice maid dat Murree yoh got. Speaks funny donshe?"

"She's French," said Adela.

"Dasso? French? Dasso? Hey now, yoh Jazzbell, ainch comin' long, tall?"

The cat so continually addressed lifted large expressionless topaz eyes. Perceiving nothing of particular interest in the white face and the black face lifted above the hedge, it relapsed again to licking.

"You said you were—when you were talking about the cat—that you were—I didn't quite catch it," said Adela, smiling quizzically at her.

"Wot I say? 'Bout her name out de Bible? Ise Mefdis Pisk. Pasto Robutts circumjexted dat name."

"You're what?" asked Adela, her brows even more wrinkled.

"Mefdis Pisk. Down tuh de Mefdis Pisk Chu'ch. Dat's mah damnation. Ah goes reglah. Well now, Jazz, you'n Ise bettuh be movin' fo' home."

With an ample wave of her arm in farewell and an assurance that she would be "dis way t'morrah" to collect her basket with more soiled linen, she swayed with a rolling gait out of the front yard. She halted in the middle of the road again with arms akimbo, regarding the cat.

"My gawd, Jazz," she ejaculated finally, "yoh is a trile on mah patience. You suah is. Wuss dan wot dat Patch is you is. Ah, clah——"

"Who's Patch?" Mrs. Ventress exhibited further interest.

"Patch? Oh, he's mah dawg. Rele name's Patcherotter. Some artis' tole me dat name. See, Patch's had a lotta dis-tempah. Sump'n book 'bout it—same kinda case. All ah know. He sho was one quaint an' quizzical man, dat Mistah Lanyon. He paint hyah all one summah. Kin to de Co'-neliuses. . . . Well, Jazz," Dinah suddenly bawled, "aincha gwine come. C'mon, baby, Ise gwine way f'm hyah. Ise gwine leave yuh. Cross mah heeht, ah is. Ise through."

She turned with an indignant waddle. Her puffing form diminished down the road. The black cat finally bestirred itself. It ceased to polish its fur, looked around idly, got up and stretched. Then suddenly it was away again after Dinah, with light pantherine leaps, and its tail waving like a plume.

Adela turned back toward the porch after an amused assimilation of this episode. Her eyes and mouth were still puckered as she bent over the laundry basket. Tupton was certainly proving a town for character. She thought them over as she propped open the screen door and began lifting and carrying the laundered linen into the cool and high-ceilinged hall that held the scent of heliotrope she had picked from one of the flower-beds that morning. Marie would carry the linen upstairs for her. As she went back and forth she cast occasional glances into the two large rooms on either side of the hall. In the northeast parlour there was haircloth, of course, and that big framed steel-engraving of "The Stag at Bay". But, despite her own modern ideas of interior decoration, it only seemed an added piquancy. Besides, it was where one "received callers". The southwest parlour, opening upon the dining-room behind it was the room she had chosen for actually living in. There she had rearranged the furniture and removed or rehung pictures to excite Bessie's admiration. What an odd little girl, Bessie!

She and that Miss Crome had so far been the only visitors. What a contrast!

Bessie had come in impulsively, yet shyly, peering about her like a bird. The screen door had squeaked, and there was Bessie. Adela had been discovered on her knees in the southwest room beside a large trunk-suitcase containing, among other impedimenta, an old portfolio. She looked up and smiled. Bessie smiled. "Hello!" said Bessie. "I hope you don't mind. I've come to see you." Five minutes after they were both sitting together on the floor, turning over the drawings.

"But—my!—why didn't you keep it up?" asked the dark child after a while, fixing adoring eyes upon the older woman.

"Well," said Adela slowly, "oh, that's a long story. I got turned off—took up something else. And now I'm sick of that. This seems——" she held one drawing up at arm's length and cocked her head on one side. "It really isn't so bad, is it? You see, I haven't resurrected these for a long, long time."

"Bad?" said Bessie. "I should say not. Where did you study?"

"I had a knack, as a girl. You'll let me see some of your own things some time?"

"Oh, but mine are so *awful*! You won't want to."

"Yes, but I do. Maybe I could help you. I'm just going to take it up again for fun. Once—for a short while—I did some regular work at it——" Mrs. Ventress's voice rather trailed away.

"Oh, *would* you?" Bessie's eyes were sparkling. "There's no really good course at the Institute. At least I think—and Slade says he's sure I could make lots of money in advertising."

"Oh, *that's* your ambition? And who's Slade?"

"My cousin. He's an editor in New York. He really is awfully clever. He writes poetry. And I do so want to do

something. But—but I'm not father's real daughter, you know. You see—you see, Gertrude——"

Adela realised. She looked at Bessie long and searchingly. The child's eyes were cast down. There was a silence.

Then Bessie lifted her own eyes and Adela's turned aside.

"You'll know it sooner or later," said the child to the woman. "You know—she ran away—Gertrude; well, she was really my cousin; her mother adopted me, afterward. I never knew her, or—or my own parents. I was just thinking, Father—you see I always think of him as my father—says *she* used to draw too. She was valedictorian, the year she ran away. Then her mother died. It's—it's all made father pretty sad," she finished awkwardly.

Adela sat without replying, her head bent over the drawings. She nodded her head in sympathy. Bessie could not see her face. "I see," said Mrs. Ventress softly, sympathetically. "I see," she repeated in an even lower tone, slightly shuffling the drawings.

"But can't we draw together—some evenings—at any time that's convenient to you. I really would love to help if there's any way I can. I could show you everything I know myself. Of course, not regular lessons, and just for our amusement——" She was not looking directly at the child.

"Oh, you *are* an angel! I'd simply adore to. But wouldn't it be imposing? Could we, next Monday evening? Today's Friday. Do you suppose we could?"

"Why, of course, if your father doesn't mind. Could you have supper here on Monday evening?"

"Oh, *could* we? Oh, I really would so love to. I'm sure father won't mind. I'll tell him all about it," stated Bessie, scrambling up. "It's *awfully* kind of you. But you're sure. It won't be imposing. I shouldn't impose."

"No," said Adela in amusement. "It certainly won't be imposing. And I'll make a nice salad for us.

"And then we'll draw. And you must bring your own work to show me."

Bessie departed as one walking in a trance, looking backward and smiling. She waved joyfully from beyond the high hedge. Her hair tossed and flopped as she started briskly toward Poplar Street.

The visit of Miss Crome had been otherwise. Marie had informed Adela, who was lying down one afternoon, that a lady was in the parlour (the real northeast parlour it proved). Entering the doorway, Adela had felt Marie to be mistaken. This was not so much a lady as a ramrod.

Miss Sophia Crome sat stiffly upon the extreme edge of the most uncomfortable hair-cloth upholstered chair, clutching tightly in her right hand the ivory handle of a faded lavender sunshade. Her nose seemed as sharp as an awl, and her steel spectacles, supported by its bony ridge, seemed to glitter with something beyond the ordinary properties of steel and glass. Her dress was stiff gray poplin, high at the neck and long in the sleeves. It gave the effect of crackling fiercely as she shifted in her chair. Her lisle thread gloves seemed permanently to clothe her discoverably bony hands.

She looked up with bright eyes and compact creased jaws that reminded Adela at once of the ebony-plastroned turtle with which a passing black boy had frightened Marie the day before. She bobbed at Adela a bonnet badly mismated to her tightly slicked and knotted iron-gray hair. She sat then with an entirely artificial smile, rubbing the fingers of her gloved hands together, fidgeting in her seat, nodding slightly as if to peculiarly satisfactory thoughts within herself.

Adela seated herself opposite upon the small sofa, in her gracefully lounging way. She smiled and attempted to be affable.

"We are glad to greet a newcomer——" began Miss Crome. *She* smiled, and Adela immediately distrusted her entirely. Miss Crome hugged herself, bent forward a little,

and began to put questions. She nodded at the replies. She nodded and looked, with down-drawn upper lip, at the ceiling. Immediately she discovered that Adela, though evidently married, did not mention her husband. She nodded at that. She nodded at the indefinite reply to her question as to Adela's occupation in New York. To the general reason for Adela's coming to Tupton, rest and change of scene, she nodded still more briefly with eyes uplifted. She went on nodding like a mandarin, till, from initial irritation, suppressed laughter began to rise and fill the whole being of her hostess, showing itself only in the added sparkle of her eyes, which eyelids strove to veil. But, despite all subterfuge, once Miss Crome caught and understood that laughing light. She nodded at the discovery till the stiff feather of her bonnet quivered vehemently.

Thereafter the inquisition ceased. Local history began. The Corneliuses were a most estimable family. Mr. Cornelius was a victim of hay-fever, a positive victim. He was the town's oldest physician. Mrs. Cornelius was a godly woman. She was also President of the Ladies Aid. The Cornelius children were flighty. This evidently, but not in the same sense as charity, covered a multitude of sins. Dr. Gedney was a queer man. Miss Crome could not understand him. His wife had been most estimable—most estimable. Mr. Pollock was the brother-in-law. His wife was deceased. This particular calamity was mentioned as with implication. Bessie and Gertrude were touched upon. Very sad, that case. The Brattles kept a good deal to themselves. A very old family. The father, who held an interest in the Meldon Ironworks, had been brevetted a General in the Civil War. In line with the Brattles, the really old residents of Tupton kept to themselves. Stores had ruined Tupton. Tupton had a proud colonial history.

The families at the three different farms did not mingle much with the people of the town. Never had. The Sayres were recent. The Cripps were an old and peculiar family. Mr. Whinnymuir was the undertaker, a god-fearing man.

Mr. Brixton was the sexton of the Presbyterian Church. He lived next to Mr. Whinnymuir on Laurel Street. Miss Crome supposed that Mrs. Ventress was a Presbyterian. No? How strange! Dr. Amendis was the pastor of the Presbyterian Church. He was indeed the Lord's right hand and had seven children. Mrs. Ventress would doubtless take an interest in the Ladies Aid of the Episcopal Church. No? She was not an Episcopalian? Doubtless she was a Methodist. It would be so strange to think that she was a Unitarian! A Quaker? There were several Quakers in Tupton. Surely not a Catholic?

Miss Crome was puzzled. No, but Mrs. Ventress must be joking. She must have some real religion. An Agnostic? Of what denomination was that a sect? Of none? Surely—but that was being the same as an atheist! The bonnet nodded violently. The jaws became still more creased, the lips still more pursed. The spectacles flashed in positive agitation. The ramrod began to quiver. The eyes sought far corners for refuge and found none. Miss Crome was standing. Her head was nodding like that of one with an uncontrollable nervous affection. She really must be going. She hoped Mrs. Ventress would call. She had come to welcome her to Tupton. Agnostic—but, dear, dear! Yes, a pretty house. Mr. and Mrs. Battell were such estimable, god-fearing people. Estimable. So estimable. Moving stiffly to the door, it was most unfortunate that at that very moment Miss Crome suddenly came face to face with The Desecration. This was in the shape of a small jade dish of Adela's set upon a pie-crust table belonging to the Battells.

Marie had been requested to remove what reposed in it, and had forgot. Miss Crome's eyes stared unbelievably as she glared at the half-smoked Melachrino which had long since gone out and now presented but a blackened stump. Miss Crome's eyes rolled heavenward and she sniffed an imperceptible sniff. She said nothing, however. She paused only an instant. She smiled in a glaringly arti-

ficial way as she said good-bye at the door. She did not repeat her invitation to call. She moved down the path like a rigid automaton in bristling poplin. Turning toward Poplin Street her acute, parrot-like profile swam along the top of the hedge, austere and forbidding. Behind her the clouds above the Hill were piled grey for rain. The sunlight of the day had gone. In the porch Adela stood with finger and thumb at her mouth, biting her lip. But when her hand dropped she was seen to be smiling. Her laughter, the moment that she entered the house, surprised Marie in the upper hall. Marie was glad that this strange change of scene seemed to be doing her mistress so much good.

Yes, there were characters in Tupton. Indubitably! Mr. Gartner, for instance, at the Post Office, who had, ever since her arrival, treated her with special consideration. A funny little embarrassed man. Jason Duffit who was rather portly, almost incoherent, and puffed. There was something peculiar about his eyes. She did not quite like the look in them. The tradespeople she had found inquisitive and appraising, but pleasant and obliging upon the whole. By now the town seemed to have accepted her. She had arrived quietly and had been driven to her new home in the herdic of Alexis White. He wore a faded and tattered porter's cap and a permanent placating smile. He met all trains for the Conestoga House and conveyed many old residents to their destinations. A new and extremely intermittent trolley system, running down one street only, hardly availed for proper transportation to the station, though it was sometimes useful if one wished to get, between trains, to Barrack Falls. Alexis White was as black and shiny as a shoe-button. He was the husband of Dinah, and they lived in a small house on the road to the Bottom, with the cat Jezebel, the dog, Patch, and an odd assortment of piccaninnies. Dinah always seemed to be vague about the exact number. But the Bottom was so full of picanninies, and they mingled so together, that this was, perhaps, excusable.

Adela finished removing and folding the laundry and called to Marie. It was half-past three in the afternoon.

While the maid disposed of the linen, Mrs. Ventress proceeded about the mahogany dining-room table in a leisurely manner, setting it for a simple supper. This was the evening of Bessie's coming, to which Dr. Gedney had assented. She was glad Bessie was coming. She wondered certain things about the child, wistfully, And, laying down a butterknife at Bessie's place, the old dull pain manifested itself again, the perpetuated pain of lovely memory. If he had only lived . . . Their home. She might have been setting the table . . . Two deep lines came between her brows.

That was why there had never been any other, never could be any other. A strange thing, but true. All that she would have done for him . . . Oh, well, her temperament was not to be sad. Suddenly she shrugged and snapped her fingers. Then she stood perfectly quiet, rigidly erect. Her face set. It looked ten years older. They had understood, they two. They had understood. Life. That was all. Her tenseness relaxed and she went on quietly setting the table.

* * *

Miss Crome had been a self-appointed pursuivant. Miss Crome considered herself the Eyes of Tupton. Half of Tupton looked upon Miss Crome as a silly eccentric old gossip, and half of it accepted her at her own valuation. The half that accepted her were The Ten. Not so the *hoi polloi* whose number increased and flourished. This also was the half of Tupton that evinced only a passing interest in the coming of Adela Ventress. They, in their own parlance had "sized her up" early. She was a "good-looker" but quiet, retiring, "slow" (in some mysterious connotation), and too old. They put her down immediately as a "lady". They supposed The Ten would take her up. But she was not for them, though they had adopted an affable enough attitude toward her with some covert admiration, on the part of the girls, for the way she dressed. And that she was "from New York" leant a certain glamour. They

returned her courtesy with their own best courtesy, but she was not one of them. They passed her by.

Of course, upon the part of the whole town there had originally been much conjecture and gossip about the new-comer. If she had appeared in an underslung French car, with a theatrical rake to her hat, and evidences of over-preparation in her complexion, the sprightlier element of Tupton would have solidly been "for her", no matter how the Old Residence Block might have shivered with repulsion. As it was, Adela repelled them somewhat by a cultivated intonation and an aloofness from their festivities. Whenever any of the "newer element" passed her gate afoot or in somewhat rattling cars, she was perceived quietly weeding, picking flowers, or reading upon the porch. Again, they had several times met her walking alone, a book tucked under her arm, a sunshade resting against her shoulder. They had decided that she was partly a snob and partly "queer".

In the stores of the shopping block on Market Street you would have heard only vague expressions of goodwill. If Dinah White might speak for The Bottom, the impression was that Adela was a "right stylish lady" and "she treats yuh right". Mrs. Gartner represented another stratum of local opinion.

"Something funny about that New York lady of yours, I think," she told her husband, the possessive intimation being mere domestic malice. "I hear nobody gets on with her very well. She's too standoffish. About the only one seems real friendly to her is that young Bessie Gedney. And an older woman like that's not good for such a young girl. They're together all the time. That Doctor Gedney don't seem to have the sense he was born with. He never seems to know whether he has a child or not. Those two are thicker'n thieves. Wish she was *my* child. I'd put a stop to it. It's got around she's teaching her drawing——"

"Who's teaching which?" interrupted Mr. Gartner, spearing a fried potato at his supper.

"That Mrs. Ventress teaching Bessie of course. A child like that. There's something wrong about it."

"'Bout what? Drawin' pictures? Seems sort of foolish but I can't say's I see any harm to it," returned Mr. Gartner.

"Course not," his spouse glared. "I mean such a friendship. And this Mrs. Ventress never does go to church either. Ain't been seen in one. And both the Presbyterian and 'Piscopal ministers have called."

"Well," said Mr. Gartner liberally. "There's some don't hold by religion——"

Mrs. Gartner bristled.

"'Tain't whether you hold by it or don't hold by it,' she pronounced. "It's goin' to church and keepin' civilised."

This way of putting it seemed final.

"Jase Duffit was sayin' somethin' to me like that," answered Mr. Gartner. "He's real shocked at some things that Miss Crome told him about Mrs. Ventress. B'lieve she found her smokin' a cigarette. 'We-el,' I told him, 'there's no 'countin' for tastes. Guess it won't more'n give her a sore throat."

"S'pose you'd like to see *me* smokin' a *pipe*?" his wife interrogated acidly.

"We-el," returned Mr. Gartner, "at that, my grandmam done it. Remember as a boy seein' her puff at a clay. It looked rele perculiar."

This anecdote had never yet failed to plunge Mrs. Gartner into resentful and morose brooding. Her lips puckered tightly. She answered nothing.

Mr. Gartner felt the silence. "Come, Ag," he remarked with a lugubrious smile. "Come out of it. I'm sorry. I didn't mean nothin'. But I daresay that woman's all right," he added. "You know well as I how talk gits around."

"After all," he continued later, "Jase Duffitt rented her the house and the Battells was satisfied. Jase even met that New York feller come down to vouch fer her. An' I understand she paid up in advance. But Jase is perculiar too. He's always believin' stories, ever since I've known 'm. He's

fidgety-like. And you know after all there's somethin' sly about Jase, somethin' I never liked someway. Can't just explain it. He's honest enough, I guess. But he listens too much to that Miss Crome, an' her tongue wags at both ends. Do you like that woman, Ag?"

"Miss Sophia Crome is a perfect lady's far's I've seen," said Mrs. Gartner, with asperity, rattling dishes in the sink. "She may wag her tongue, but I'm sure she don't mean no harm by it. She ain't standoffish and peculiar anyway. She's rele neighbourly."

"Yes," ruminated Mr. Gartner. "She's neighbourly, as you call it, and then again she ain't. That is, you might put it, she's too nosey. She goes around too much spreading gossip."

"I ain't," was Mr. Gartner's last remark on that particular subject that evening, "I ain't so keen fer that Sophia Crome."

And, after all, Adela's relations with the tradespeople of the town excited no criticism. She seemed to know how to run her own house and she paid her bills. True, there was some discussion of the occupation and whereabouts of her husband. She was evidently not a widow. She was, as evidently, a lady. A few ingenuously inquisitive souls who had evinced an undue interest in her married state had retired baffled, not by ambiguity or rudeness, but by a calm and dexterous changing of the subject, with perfect good-nature. Not possessing Mrs. Ventress's *aplomb* they withdrew to mull over their own conjectures. It was believed, however, that she and her husband had separated.

There *was* much conjecture in certain quarters. Two people in the town never met now that they did not conjecture. Miss Crome already knew all that Jason Duffitt could supply as to Mrs. Ventress's identity. It was not much, save that she had been properly vouched for and had paid for the house in advance. On the other hand Jason listened with puffy interest to Miss Crome's weighing of probabilities. Meanwhile a shadow like a dark dog lay asleep in the June sunshine of Market Street, where daily the conversing

and huckstering populace passed. The shadow sometimes raised a vague ill-shapen head to sniff at trivial things. Adela, as she passed back and forth to market or her favourite stores walked unaware of the shadow, that potential guardian of the public peace of mind that can be tragically aroused to run baying through the streets of the most somnolent of villages.

Miss Crome's call had resulted in what, to her, seemed dubious discoveries. Several other incursions upon Adela's initial isolation thickened the mystery. Mrs. Adolphus Frazee, for instance, had called, in the Frazee's new and glossy Packard, a magnificent concession to the spirit of the times. Mrs. Frazee, sleek, pursed and portly in her blue dress with white facings, her blue but otherwise indescribable hat perking neatly from above her eminently sensible coiffure, had laid, with an air, upon Marie's extended tray, two cards engraved "Mr. Adolphus Frazee", "Mrs. Frazee". With the phantom presence of the temporarily absent Adolphus supporting her, she had swept into the northeast parlour.

Adela had come in from the vegetable garden. She wore a dark blue house dress with a Dutch neck and elbow sleeves. It gave her a youthful appearance. She had stopped to wash her hands and tidy her hair, but she still looked slightly *distract* with digging.

"How do you do. I am Mrs. Frazee," said that lady, with quite a self-satisfied intonation, nodding slightly, slightly rising.

"Don't get up," said Adela quickly. "How do you do. I've been gardening. You'll excuse me, won't you."

They exchanged the ordinary conversational openings for several minutes, during which time Mrs. Frazee noted that Adela's skirt was quite short and that she crossed her knees.

By a most unfortunate turn of topic they got on the subject of Labour, and Mrs. Ventress expressed a rather cloudy sympathy with the West Virginian miners. Upon the subject of Servants she seemed, however, more "sound"—ex-

cept that she declared she had had small trouble in securing a cook.

"Do you expect your husband to join you for the summer?" inquired Mrs. Frazee in her impeccable manner.

"My husband!" Adela returned, evidently quite at sea for a moment. "Oh! My husband! No. No, he won't be out here. Business, business—in New York."

Mrs. Frazee nodded gravely and let it be understood that she saw. She cast down her eyes as Adela slightly turned her head away. Evidently, considered Mrs. Frazee, viewing nevertheless the bitten lip and half-closed eyes of her agitation,—quite evidently they were, as people had said, separated.

Mrs. Frazee said nothing more for a moment. Mrs. Ventress turned the subject to other matters. Mrs. Ventress's lips were certainly very red. Mrs. Frazee wondered——. Mrs. Ventress spoke of herself, in passing, as a feminist. Mrs. Frazee did not exactly understand, but she thought that Adolphus——. Mrs. Ventress certainly was not so enthusiastic about the League of Nations as was Rebecca Stone. Still, she quoted from one of Senator Lodge's speeches and ridiculed it in one biting sentence. Tht—tht—Mrs. Frazee was *sure* that Adolphus——! Adolphus, however, did not believe in Prohibition either. Mrs. Ventress had said she saw no harm in cocktails. Well, of course, Mrs. Frazee had known that that was New York. Mrs. Ventress got on books and mentioned several novels Mrs. Frazee had not read. Mrs. Frazee spoke of "Pendennis." Mrs. Ventress got Mrs. Frazee mixed up on "Pendennis." She had not read it for so long——. Mrs. Ventress begged her pardon, but wasn't Rosie Mackenzie in "The Newcomes" instead? And didn't Mrs. Frazee like Captain Costigan? Well, no, Mrs. Frazee had never quite approved Captain Costigan. He was, well, rather outlandish. Mrs. Frazee quoted inaccurately in illustration. Mrs. Ventress said wasn't that said, though, by Major Pendennis? Mrs. Ventress quoted smilingly to the point. Mrs. Frazee felt un-

comfortable. Mrs. Frazee must be going. Couldn't Mrs. Ventress come to dinner next Monday? So delighted to have her. She would like her to see her new dahlias. Well, *good-bye*—yes, yes, *good-bye*. . . .

Others from the Old Residence Block had called. The Miss Babbitts had found her too girlish. "She *is* rather pretty, but she seems too well aware of it. She swears too. She said 'Damn!' when her dress caught in the door. You heard her, Clara!" Thus the elder Miss Babbitt, whose idea of extreme frivolity was still a game of croquet on their seemingly back lawn. The Miss Babbitts were fifty and fifty-two. They lived in the days of the Civil War. They wore black for parents dead thirty years ago. They resembled perambulating vegetables. They had vegetable faces. The stouter Miss Babbitt looked like a potato, the leaner like a carrot. Their entire lives had been spent in provincial affluence and the parental domicile. Life was something they had heard about, but they had not been introduced.

"Hardly pretty, I should say," the Potato Miss Babbitt supplied. "Rather affected for a woman of her evident age. But what seems rather sad is that she has so little sense of humour. She did not smile once at that story of Uncle Harry and Mrs. Mixter's horse. That is always the test, to me."

Mrs. Ventress had come to dinner at Mrs. Frazee's in what seemed a very sheer black net. She seemed entirely unconscious of her white neck and arms. Mrs. Frazee could not be unconscious of them. It was apparent that neither General Brattle nor young Harry Persons were unconscious. It was grave that Adolphus seemed so Conscious. It was unnecessary that Mrs. Ventress should have dressed in that manner.

It went quite smoothly for a while. Mrs. Ventress was perhaps too much engaged in conversation with the men on her right and left. Conversation should be more general. However, Mr. Mixter launched forth on the subject of

women. It was as certain as fate. Mrs. Ventress spiritedly did not concur. She was being satiric. She was making Mr. Mixter listen. The whole table was listening.

Mr. Jeremiah Mixter was answering. He was annoyed. Adolphus was plunging in. Adolphus always *plunged* so. Mrs. Ventress was a bright defiance. Rebecca Stone, though she could not get a word in, was looking at Mrs. Ventress with a new interest, from the opposite side of the table. Mrs. Ventress had shrugged very slightly and had resumed eating her fish. She was talking to young Harry Persons on her left.

General Brattle and Dr. John Cornelius had joined in anathematising the world-state idea. Mrs. Ventress was still talking to Harry Persons, about the theatre. The conversation anent the world-state crackled generally. Mrs. Ventress had ventured the opinion that an international court to adjudicate the claims of all nations, might, in spite of present disappointments, lie among the possibilities of future civilisation. Dr. John was sonorously quoting Senator Borah. Mrs. Ventress had said something flippant about Senator Borah. Rebecca Stone laughed at it, and Mrs. Ventress looked across the table, smiling at her. Finally, it seemed that she was somehow teasing General Brattle about Preparedness. General Brattle was gobbling like a bubblyjock. He was being very crushing, saying, "But my *dear* young lady——!" Mrs. Ventress was being humorous about her age. Mrs. Frazee sighed heavily. This would never do. Really, *really*! She signalled her husband that they were to rise.

Harry Persons said afterward that Mrs. Ventress was an extraordinarily interesting woman. General Brattle had, however, departed without saying good-night to her. Adolphus was irritated. Jeremiah Mixter seemed for once to have nothing to say. Next day the feminine element, meeting at tea at the Miss Babbitts' expressed in various feminine fashion their distaste. There was something unwomanly; there was a hard veneer, a sophistication; she had

told Mr. Burley a story, oh, no, not exactly improper, but just a trifle too witty. She was a pretty little thing, but Randolph Utterson had used the right word, "opinionated"; she was faded looking and General Brattle, even though so Conscious, had said she was tiresome; she moved in quite—oh, *quite*—a different world, the Carrotish Miss Babbitt was sure. Only Rebecca Stone, coming in late, with her air of eye-glassed independence, absent-mindedly asked them all what on earth they were all talking about and pronounced Mrs. Ventress "an acquisition". She, Rebecca, intended going to see her to-morrow. She, Mrs. Ventress, had read "Candide".

No one else present had read "Candide". And anyway that was exactly like Rebecca. There was a feeling that she would not be at all good for Rebecca. She would "encourage" her.

Mrs. Ventress called upon Mrs. Frazee when Mrs. Frazee was out. She did not leave a card. That seemed, well—too casual. Mrs. Ventress was passing Jeremiah Mixter on the street, with the Gedney girl, and did not see him. Mrs. Ventress and the Gedney girl seemed too intimate. Rebecca Stone had borrowed several books from Mrs. Ventress. They were French novels. It was no secret now that Mrs. Ventress smoked cigarettes. Caroline Utterson also had heard her swear again. She did not go to church. She rarely crossed Market Street. Rebecca Stone reported that Mrs. Ventress was now reading Nietzsche. Harry Persons had met Mrs. Ventress by accident one afternoon—or was it?—and had walked down Sycamore Street with her. Mrs. Harry Persons declared herself not at all worried, but both the Miss Babbitts felt outraged. Poor little Ethel!

There is no predicting the silliness of small communities—and then, of course, there are innumerable instances large and small beside that of Giordano Bruno who was burned at the stake because he felt that Aristotle was, perhaps, too provincially hasty in believing the earth to be the centre of the universe.

Adela took many long walks by herself past the farms and through the fields near Tupton. Unwittingly by so doing she broke unwritten law for one of her caste. She was seen climbing over a rail fence. She was even, once,—and this was regarded as a fiery portent—overlooked from the passing car of Dr. John Cornelius, wading in the shallows of the Passamint near the bridge beyond the Cripps farm. True, the place chosen was secluded. If Dr. Cornelius had not had carburetor trouble at that point—. A book lay open on the bank, beside a pair of small discarded Oxfords. But really! A married woman! By the way, you know, she never *mentions* her husband! No, Mrs. Frazee is absolutely *certain* he is *not* dead. Not dead—but wading! There is some wildness—there is something—. It was agreed that There Was Something.

Meanwhile, except for her roaming and reading, (the scandalous incident of the wading was the only occasion of its kind, fortunately) the subject of all these almost daily discussions continued to conduct her household and her daily affairs in a competent, unobtrusive manner. At least she had sealed to her Dinah White. At least the grocery boy from Ratcliffe's confided to her the true facts about his collection of snapping-turtles and his mastery of an out-drop. At least Bessie Gedney continued to find her a wonderful exemplar in the art of making things look like something in a few lines. At least the tradespeople with whom she had to do began to look forward to her pleasant manner and her smile and her pretty clothes as she entered their stores from the morning glare of Market Street.

As to Tupton society, it is indubitable that Adela's destiny was to fall between two stools. While the all-powerful Ten certainly accepted her as a "lady", they soon came to look upon her askance. She seemed to them a potential incendiary. She puzzled and irritated them by possession of too much general information. She had an exasperating way of questioning all statements made *ex cathedra*. And that was the prerogative, unimpeached heretofore, of their

accepted leaders. That her manner in argument was charmingly well-bred made it particularly hard to bear. Their pet prejudices seemed to cause her more quiet amusement than discomfiture. She had now withdrawn gracefully into her own silence. She bowed agreeably to all of them upon the street, but had quietly manœuvred herself into the position of remaining quite outside their influence. Finally, she had committed the unpardonable sin of momentarily shaking The Ten's confidence in themselves. Highly Abderitan! The natives of that section of Thrace were famed of old, as you know, for a certain lack of intelligence. They could not forgive her, so they tried to forget her. And as the Other Half Rome had already adopted that attitude, for other reasons, Adela found herself singularly alone in Tupton, so far as local society was concerned. And this suited her exactly. It was deeply restful.

CHAPTER X: UNCLE ARTHUR SYMPATHIZES WITH XERXES

IN the rear of Uncle Arthur's big back-yard was a chicken-house about fourteen by twenty-four with shrubbery against the fence to the north of it and a wired run extending parallel to its westward facing front. Its ridgepole was about seven feet from the ground, its roof covered with tarpaper. In the run the game chickens strutted and pecked. The black-breasted ones with their greyish-brown, salmon-breasted hens; the red pyle cocks with orange hackle and saddle, and their white hens; the orange-legged Cornish Indians in bright brown and glossy green. They made a fine showing.

"And what's the jet black one?" asked Bessie.

"Black Sumatra. You don't see so many round here. There's the hen too—good layer and a good mother. I'll bet that's a seven-pound hen. The blacks have heavier feathers. But that red Game's the standard fowl. Those Indian Games are the heaviest. There's a hen weighs eight and a half. I cured that brown red Game hen, that dark one with the lemon hackle—cured her of the roup. You can't if it's advanced. That one over there, with the lemon colour lacing."

"How did you?"

"That!" Uncle Arthur turned around and pointed to the cellar-door near which stood a red-banded silverly shining kerosene oil can.

"Or rather I filled a sewing-machine can from it and got the oil into her nose and beak. Then of course I put some condition powder into her mash and aconite in her drinking water. Looks pretty now, don't she?"

Bessie nodded.

Uncle Arthur was meditatively full of his subject and went on spasmodically.

"Of course these aren't what they call 'pit' fowl. They're exhibition birds. Remember when I showed them at the Meldon County Fair? Long leg and neck's what you want. What you must have. Short-feathered saddle. Short hackle. Pit fowl have lots of hackle. Notice these don't. There's a duck-wing. Ain't that a beauty?"

He pointed out a golden male with straw-coloured neck and saddle and a shining coppery back. A blue-black bar striped each wing.

"Where's Ptolemy?" asked Bessie, peering.

"The one your father named? He's that Sumatra—with the long tail. The one lifting his feet over there. Got three spurs on his leg—see?"

"My, you know a lot about them, Uncle Arthur!"

"Oh, no. Very little. A hobby of mine. Old man must have his hobby, you know. Want to see inside?"

He entered the small door in the west end and stood in the four-foot alleyway on the north side of the building. Bessie peered around at the nest-boxes, the platform-raised roosts and the dust-box in the corner. It was smelly. The feed-trough ran low near the floor in front and beyond her. There was a water-dish at the end of the feed-trough. The floor was boarded.

"What's that box for?"

"Dust. Fowls get verminous in late fall and winter if they can't get a dust-bath. Get it in the summer—but in cold weather they're so cooped up. I'll fill that from the Axter Road. Good fine dust there."

They returned outside and visited the several brood coops set in another wired inclosure. The flaps of the coops were up and yellow and brown puffballs cheeped up and down behind a netting to the spasmodic clucking of their alert mothers. Bessie indulged in many pointings, adorations, exclamations. Uncle Arthur puffed at his pipe and went over to examine a ripening pear-tree for scale.

"So Slade's coming for the Fourth," he remarked finally, when he had satisfied himself that the spray-pump was not needed just yet.

Bessie turned and came over to him.

"He'll get here to-morrow night. Won't it be nice to see him?"

"Right you are, Bess. It will be nice. How long is he going to stay?"

"Just till Monday. Over the Fourth. But he's *promised*," Bessie emphasized, "to come later for his vacation too. Don't you like Slade, Uncle Arthur? I think he's fine, don't you?"

Her relative cast a sidelong quizzical glance at her, removed his grey cap and scratched the top of his head. His astigmatic eye twinkled like a spark. "Yes," he nodded judgmatically. "I like Slade. Like him all right. He's a nice boy. Don't understand some of his ideas. That stuff he writes is way over my head. But I like Slade. He's got a lot to learn, but he knows it. His mother used to worry about him, but he seems doing well in this magazine work. Haven't seen him, let's see, going on two years. He's got good manners, that boy. He may amount to something."

"But he isn't a *boy*, Uncle Arthur! Why he's really assistant editor of the *Colosseum*. And there's that book of his poetry. He didn't have to pay for it being published, you know. They——"

"Poetry—mm!" said Uncle Arthur, rolling his astigmatic eye. "Well, you know, Bess, my taste runs to chickens. He didn't have to pay for it—no. But neither did it pay him. Fell pretty flat. He told me so himself. Well, it's his hobby—only it seems to me hobbies are more in line for us old fellows. Still, he's done well for himself."

"But Uncle Arthur—you are—er—preposterous. Slade's a real writer. He has the gift. Father thinks so. Don't you see that what he writes is the really important thing—not the magazine work? Don't you see *that*, you funny old Uncle Arthur?"

In her Bessieish way she was doing what looked like a few minuet steps in front of him. Her black hair was in a tangle about her face and her black eyes were sparkling. She tossed her hair back from her eyes with the aid of both hands, and then stood gracefully slouching with a hand on either hip, her head slightly cocked on one side.

Uncle Arthur was looking away over the top of the house.

"Eh! Oh, all right, Bess. Well, what's he going to bring with him? Fire-crackers?"

"*Fire-crackers!*" Bessie's lip curled with pleasing scorn. "Though of course we'll have some fireworks in the orchard that night. Uncle Arthur, you *know* we'll have fireworks in the orchard?" she finished pleadingly, with a strangely childish reversal of the semi-adult tone with which she had begun.

"Oh, absolutely, Bess,—we'll have fireworks," Uncle Arthur promised, his enormous girth slightly agitated by inner laughter. "Slade'll make a fizzle of the pinwheels again, though. Remember two years ago?"

"He *won't!*" she answered with spirit. "You know he won't. You're teasing. And of course I suppose Adela will be invited," she added in a very dignified tone.

"Adela?" Uncle Arthur immediately frowned suspicion. "Adela who?"

"Mrs. Ventress. She's my best friend now in Tupton and she's the most adorable person and you know she has been teaching me drawing and she would simply love the fireworks I'm sure and she gets so little fun."

The sentence streamed forth with a total lack of punctuation. It was possessed of cumulative earnestness.

Uncle Arthur's frown had deepened. He bit his lip. The grey cap had been replaced, much over his nose. He seemed extremely interested in contemplating the ridgepole of his house from several angles. His colour heightened and a certain stubborn oaken quality seemed to creep into the bagginess of his clothes.

"Look here, Bess, I think *nothing* of it!" he said. "I—

er—I've been meaning to speak to you for some time about that. I—er—you know I don't like—I mean to say——” his voice got thicker, preluding, as Bessie well knew, some sort of outburst. Uncle Arthur could never express his deepest emotions. His endeavours at tact always culminated in some explosive phrase which hardly clarified the situation.

“Oh, Goliath,” he suddenly exclaimed. “It's—the trouble is—well, what do any of us know about that woman, Bess. I've been seriously worried. About you. You know Charley—oh Mammonites!—you know your father. It seems utterly inexcusable of him. Why did he do it? Oh, great leaping trout! I am inclined utterly to give it up!”

His agitation was apparent in the irascible bumbling of his syllables and the vast shrugging of his shoulders. He began to walk up and down with his hands behind his back.

Bessie had expected something of the kind. She stood slowly scraping the toe of one low tan shoe into the dirt around the root of an apple tree. Her hair flopped over her eyes. She said nothing.

Uncle Arthur quickened the pace of his short walking to and fro. He glanced at her ever and anon worriedly out of the corner of his better eye. He crammed his cap more fiercely upon his head. He bit upon his pipe.

Suddenly Bessie raised her head, shook back her hair and laughed. He halted with pipe drooping from his lip, in front of her.

“Oh, you great goose,” she said in the occasional ageless feminine tone that always checkmated him. “What *is* the matter? As if she could hurt *me*!”

“Well, it *is* that!” said her huge relative in a tone singularly boyish and contrite for all his years. But he reverted almost immediately to the more pompous.

“It's this, Bess. If Charley won't see it properly, why I do. There's talk about it already in the town. It isn't good for you to see so much of a so much older woman none of us know hardly at all. It isn't good for any young girl,

these sudden great intimacies with older women—least of all when no one knows anything about her. Now she may be all right—she may be all right—(though Uncle Arthur's eyes denied the possibility of it)—I'm not saying she isn't," he hastened on as he saw Bessie opening her mouth to reply. "I ain't saying she isn't—she may be all right—" (he was obviously stalling for another flow of ideas), "she may be, but the fact is your father and I are your guardians and we can't see you running into any harm—and—oh, Charley wouldn't see the side of a barn until he ran into it—so I have to take it upon myself, to take it upon myself—Bess, you simply oughtn't to see any more of that woman. It's bad for you, and you must know it yourself, and the whole town is talking!"

He ended with great vehemence, avoided his niece's dilating eyes and, removing his jammed cap with some difficulty, again applied hands to his hair, which now stood up in every direction across his pate like the ill-arranged halo of some wild and preposterous saint.

Bessie's eyes grew wider and wider and her mouth opened and shut. She began to teeter toe and heel and swing her arms a little. *A bon chat bon rat!*

"Uncle Arthur," she said quite primly, "while appreciating your—your solicitation—but that's not the word I mean, I must tell you that Mrs. Ventress is one of the finest women I have ever met. And furthermore (how well that word rolled off the tongue) and furrurthermore," said Bessie impressively, "I consider her in every way a perfectly fit companion for me. And furrurthermore—after that—(Her head was back and her mouth open to draw breath for a crushing climax). "Furthermore, after that," she repeated, "if you think I care what the sneaky gossips of this town like Miss Crome say about my most utterly and extremely nice Adela, why I can tell you I simply don't care what that Miss Crome or any other slithery gossip in this town says, and it isn't true anyway—and if you don't let her come to

the fireworks, I mean Adela, which I know you wouldn't really not do, you will most certainly break my heart."

It was not so arresting a group of closing periods as she had planned. It did not satisfy her. But she delivered it in a most dignified manner. Any ambiguity could not be mistaken by Uncle Arthur.

He remained planted before her like a solid oak. But then he began to walk up and down again. He blew his nose violently. The scar on his left cheek burned. He put on an evidently artificial smile, as convincing to Bessie as if he had suddenly attached to his chin a false purple beard. He waved large hands.

"Now, Bess," he said, "you know perfectly well I intended no insult to your friend. I—she may be all right, perfectly all right. I don't really think, though, that we should invite her to the fireworks. And then do think of Slade too, you know. (This was deep.) He won't want to have strangers about I'm sure,—just a family party. And we'll have such a pleasant time. Don't spoil it. It—" suddenly the explosiveness returned. The mask dropped. The incoherently incensed small-boy face purpled. "It ain't fair, Bess. Who is this woman, anyhow? Great Hippopotami, who is she? I'd like to know. Oh, holy dancing Zebra, it does seem too bad, I must say——"

"Uncle Arthur," his niece answered, standing straight and speaking gravely, "I do believe you're jealous."

"Jealous! Great painted Snails! Jealous? Of what? Of that woman? Bess, can't you see that you really ought not to go around there so much? You ought *not* to, I should think, (aggrievedly) if only that it worries your poor old uncle. I think absolutely *nothing* of it!"

Bessie stamped her small foot. "Stop it, Arthur. (It had long been her custom to call him Arthur when she was angry with him.) I won't have you saying 'this woman', 'this woman', 'this woman'. It's too silly. And you seem to think me——" the voice melted all at once into a tone of the most intense lassitude. "Oh, Arthur, you seem to think

me *such* a child. I'm not a child any more, I'm not, I'm not. *And you know it!* You know perfectly well I can take care of myself. You know perfectly well I'm fond of you too, and still at the same time that I won't be bossed. Father doesn't boss me——"

(At this point the enormous relative raised hands, but not in piety, to heaven, and ejaculated a smothered "Charley!") "I won't be. I won't be. Now you know you'll be polite and ask my dear, my adored, my beloved Adela to the fireworks, and say no more about it!"

"I will if I don't see her—— I will if I don't see her——" interrupted Uncle Arthur with wide waving of his hands. "Oh, well, have it your own way! But I refuse to be a party to it. I utterly refuse to be a party to it. You may bring her if you like, and I will sit indoors among all the vicious mosquitoes and suffer from my hay fever. What does it matter. Infernal hinges of Erebus, what does it matter! You always have your own way. I tell you it is stark peril. But who am I then. Only your uncle. Why should I be listened to? And I had looked forward so to seeing Slade. Oh, well, I sympathize with Xerxes! Whips and manacles! It is all too horrible!"

He waved his hands and heaved his girth in a Gargantaun gesture of abandonment and stumped off toward the house, his grey cap in his hand. Bessie recognised his complete capitulation in the reference to Xerxes. Uncle Arthur always fell back upon the famous Persian's passion whenever the last remnants of his inexpressiveness utterly failed. His mortal despair in any given situation was inseparably connected in his mind with that indignant monarch striving to chasten the Hellespont. But who shall bridle the sea?

The sixteen-year-old child stood staring after him with her head on one side. Her inner being was far more delighted than depressed. She even did several more minuet steps. She then started after him, in a half-skipping run, had caught his arm before he had reached the steps of the

side-porch, and five minutes later they were bending together over a case of stuffed birds in the parlour, with the utmost affection and mutual interest. Mrs. Ventress was not alluded to again that afternoon.

CHAPTER XI: HELEN AND THE CHINA ANIMALS

POP—pop-pop—BANG!—pop—pop-pop-pop!

The heavy breather on the bed flung one brown arm across his chest. His body looked shapeless under the wrinkled sheet, hunched up like a bundle. His open eyes were rested by the white ceiling, but it was smotheringly warm. With an effort of will he turned on his side and picked up his watch from the chair.

6:30.

He sat up, his light hair in great disorder, his blue eyes wild and staring. They calmed as he regarded the green bureau, the lighter apple-green of the wall-paper, his clothes in a heterogeneous huddle upon a chair, his collar and necktie in disorder upon the bureau. The Glorious Fourth!

Pop—pop-pop—Bang! Bang—pop—pop.

Slade's lean brown hands went round his knees. His chin lay for a moment upon them. He yawned enormously.

Too early for breakfast. Breakfast was at eight. When had he better take his bath? Did Uncle Charles get up early?

He scrambled from bed and padded to the door, opened it a crack, listened. The bathroom was across the hall. A thin mosquitoish sound came from Dr. Gedney's room beyond it. Otherwise the house was quite quiet. Should he run his bath?

Too early. Might disturb them. He went back and sat on his bed, scratching his head.

Rafe's voice, the voice of memory, sang clearly in his inner ear.

"Keep your *head* down—Alleymand!
 Keep your *head* down—Alleymand!
Late last night, by the *star*-shell light,
 We sa-aw you—we sa-a-aw you!
 You were *something*—something wire
 When we *opened* up with rapid-fire.
 If you *want* to see your father
 In the *Fa*-ther-land,
 Keep your *head* down, Alleymand!"

Ground school at Columbus. Singing along the barrack bunks at night, after lights out, promptly cut into by a snarling yelp from the cadet in charge. Texas. Coughing at Kelly Field. Coughing your heart out. The fine black Texas dust. Stealing into the lavatory to choke off your coughing that roused grumblings and pyrotechnic cursing,—and to smoke the fag that sometimes helped.

The War! Good heavens, how infinitely far away that all was!

The patriotism of *The Colosseum*. Maybe that was the only reason they had taken him on after the War, even though he had never got across, and the Armistice had found him bored to tears at desk work in Washington. About ten Lieutenants for every trivial job. Damn the War! How terribly excited he had been—and to be stuck in the D.M.A.! Well, he wanted to forget all that forever. Fizzle. Failure. Bunk. *Such* bunk! So much hideous bunk! Good lord!

Stagger, camber, angle of incidence, flying wires, landing wires, joy-stick, elevators, "keep her nose on the horizon". . .

"Keep your *head* down, Alleymand. . . !"

Good fun though—at Hicks—especially when they thought their squadron was going to Mineola. The eternal morning drone of the planes. "*Con*-tact!" The leather-hooded figure in goggles peering over the coaming of the cockpit. The mechanic revving-up, then dangerously but dexterously swinging the prop. The roar of it, and the

rushing wind. The bus turned toward the field and let go. The cold air in his face. The jouncing rush, tail up, diminishing across the turf, blowing off the ground like a feather, rising, rising . . . a droning speck in the clean, clear blue of the Texas sky. . .

Gosh!

What an incredible other life it all seemed! Rafe thought so too. Rafe and he had long since talked themselves out upon it all. Fed up. Forever. Completely. But sometimes it sang in the blood again.

Who is this woman Bess wants me to meet? Bess is certainly getting darn pretty. Did I send that man's manuscript back with my letter? Must have. No? *Sure*, I must have. Didn't they *ever* know what was good, though? Why the devil did Old T. B. turn down that poem of Jean Doncett's?

Have to go around the Village more with Rafe. How he loved it! Oh, well, when you're working in advertising. A relief, maybe. But you ran into so many of the same people in an editorial office. Mustn't get stodgy, though. Wonder when I'd better manœuvre for another raise?

Wasn't it warm! *Whew!* Must be hot in New York. Always hot on the Fourth. Was that a tap? "*Yes?*"

"Slade, you can get your bath now."

"Thanks, Bess. All right."

* * *

Clothed in blue coat and white flannels, and considerably cooler, he sat at breakfast with Bessie and his uncle.

"What are you two doing this morning?" asked the Doctor.

"I'm going to take Slade over to see Adela," Bessie said.

"Oh, Mrs. Ventress. Well—oh, all right. Not going to stay there all morning though, are you?"

"Oh, no, that's just part of it. I'm going to take Slade for a walk—if it isn't too hot."

"Thought Slade wanted to play tennis?"

"The Institute court is so bad this year——"

"Oh, no, I really don't care at all about that," interrupted Slade. "Anything Bessie wants to do, Uncle Charles. You aren't coming with us?"

"I think not. I've got some pottering about to do," Dr. Gedney always referred thus to his writing. "You two go. You'll meet the famous Mrs. Ventress, Slade. Bessie's told you about her?"

"Yes. Sounds nice. My, your drawing *has* improved, Bess," he added, turning to his cousin.

"Do you really think so? It's all her. But you hadn't seen anything for some time, had you?"

"Not for two years. Why, you certainly ought to be able to get work to do in New York."

"Oh, Slade! *Really?*"

"Sure. I'm positive of it. But what do you think, Uncle Charles? Would you let her go?"

"Well," said Dr. Gedney, "Bessie's young yet—not through school. Better let that rest a little while. But I know she wants it. And I think she could do it. But we'd better let it——" His voice trailed away into silence. It always made him rather nervous to think of Bessie's leaving him,

* * *

"There she is," said Bessie, clutching Slade's arm and pointing over the hedge. What he saw was principally a hat and a grey dress. Mrs. Ventress was bending over a small flower-bed of blue lobelia edged with white alyssum. She had chamois gloves on, with holes for the knuckles. She was doing something with a trowel.

"Oo-oo!" called Bessie softly.

Adela straightened and turned. Her wide grey hat and the cool daintiness of her dress set off her pretty colour. Her fair skin had gained a tanned warmth from walks and working in the garden. Her smile was odd and delightful.

"Hello. Who have you there?"

"This is my cousin, Slade," Bessie presented, as Mrs. Ventress came toward them. Slade removed his straw hat

and shook hands over the hedge. He had a pleasant three-cornered grin.

"Bessie's certainly been singing your praises," he said.

"Has she? Well, we've had some nice times, haven't we, Bessie? Won't you come in? Do you mind sitting on the porch steps? I like it."

Slade sat on the step below the two women.

"Isn't he nice?" asked Bessie, suddenly tousling his hair. "Now Slade will hate me. He hates that."

"Oh, I don't really believe so," said Adela, amused.

Slade dug in the walk with a small stick. "You've certainly helped her a lot with her drawing," he said seriously, looking up. "I want her to come to New York and try her luck after she graduates. By the way, you come from there don't you?"

"Yes. I'm here resting. I was doing a little work——"

"What kind of work?"

"Oh, a little writing. I got tired of it. As I had a little money, I decided to come here for a while."

"Writing? What kind of thing?"

"Oh, nothing much," said Mrs. Ventress. "Nothing you ever read, I'm sure. Quite unimportant. Just a sort of means of making a living. But I've stopped it. I don't have to any more. I'm—in a way—trying to find myself."

"How do you mean?"

"Oh, thinking of taking up something else and wondering what it is to be. Anyway, this is a vacation. So don't let's talk about my 'work'." She smiled.

"I *know* she writes awfully well," said Bessie with conviction, "and that she's hiding it from us. She won't tell me a *thing*, Slade. She's the worst woman!"

She looked at Adela adoringly.

"I'm sure she does," said Slade. "You're coming over to Uncle Arthur's this evening, aren't you?" he asked Mrs. Ventress. "For the fireworks?"

"Why, Bessie has been kind enough to invite me. But I haven't met your Uncle—as a matter of fact I haven't

even met your Uncle Charles yet—so I hardly know——”

“Oh, yes, you *are*,” said Bessie. “That’s all settled. This afternoon there’s a parade too, the firemen’s, down Market Street. But I don’t suppose you’d care to come with us?”

“Well, I’ll tell you, you’d better leave me out of that. You two go along. I’m an old and stodgy person. You’d better, really. I don’t care much for fanfare. Didn’t they start in early this morning with the fire-crackers though? Of course you heard them?”

“They woke me up,” answered Slade. “I sleep very lightly—they always do.”

As he looked at Adela he felt that he had never seen a more charming face. How pretty and graceful she was, and how young she looked. What was her story?

“Do you like New York?” he asked.

“I did, I used to. I don’t know. I wanted to get away from it. It’s a fascinating city, of course—and I’ve occasionally hated it as I’ve hated nothing else in the world.”

“Check,” said Slade. “So have I. Gets on all one’s nerves sometimes. Too many impressions to take in at once. Three ring circus.”

“You’re on a magazine there, aren’t you? I wonder if you know——” But Adela caught herself up.

“Who?”

“Oh, nothing—just someone I used to know who was in the publishing business. But that was long before your time of course. Do you like it?” she added to change the subject.

“Yes. It’s good fun. I’ve learned a lot. I wanted to write myself——”

“Slade does write,” interpolated Bessie. “Beautiful poetry.”

“Oh *no*,” said Slade embarrassedly. “No, Bess. I brought out one book. That was a year ago. But that teaches you something.”

“I can see it sometime, can’t I?” asked Adela.

“Why, yes,” said Slade, looking up again with the same

half-embarrassed, half-speculative expression in his eyes. "If you want to. Do *you* write poetry?"

"Oh, no. But there are certain things I like. I might like yours."

"You wouldn't," said Slade promptly, slightly gloomy. "But I'm going on with it," he added. He laughed rather ruefully. "I can't seem to cure myself."

"That's a good sign, I should think. But you're pretty busy, aren't you, with the office?"

"Fairly. And of course it's congenial work. But after all, it's all in myself if I ever amount to anything. I may come to the point where I see I can't write. I haven't yet. Meanwhile, as I said, I'm learning."

"How do you like it here?" he asked a moment later.

"Very much. I'm not so sure the people like *me*——"

"Oh, they *do*!" Bessie sprang to her defence against her own suspicion.

"No, I'm not at all so sure they do. Perhaps I've kept too much to myself. But after all, that's what I came down here for. And I *am* getting a thorough rest. Oh, I love this old garden. I love the quiet. I think I'll stand the hot weather all right, too. It hasn't proved so very hot yet. Well, you two will want to be running along. What time am I expected at your Uncle's, Bessie?"

"Oh, Slade and I will call for you," said Bessie. "About eight o'clock."

"Good. I'll be ready."

"There'll be some ice-cream!" (Bessie smiled at her own childishness.)

"Better still! Good-bye," laughed Adela.

"Good-bye," they smiled from the gate.

"Yes, she certainly is most attractive," commented Slade as they walked home. "Awfully nice. She has beautiful eyes, hasn't she?"

He seemed abstracted. Bessie ran into a eulogium of Mrs. Ventress's many singular merits.

The afternoon proved hot and noisy. Standing on grocery

boxes, Slade and Bessie watched for a little while the Firemen's parade. Then it bored them. A small hole was burned in Bessie's dress by a youthful patriot's brown stick of punk. The pervading gunpowdery smell was everywhere in their nostrils, and the dust. Desultory popping and crackling down Market Street continued through their light supper. They stopped for Mrs. Ventress while the day was still light. She awaited them all in white. She looked perfectly attired and dainty and cool. Slade noticed the rose-leaf colour in her face. He did not realise that he was staring.

"Oh, how *lovely* you look," called the more articulate Bessie, and ran up the steps to kiss her friend. They linked arms. They proceeded toward Sycamore Street and Uncle Arthur's.

It was dusk by the time they arrived. It was just the family. Dr. Gedney and Uncle Arthur were already taking a turn under the apple trees. Uncle Arthur was a white blur in a panama suit, Dr. Gedney a blur, as to clothes, of dark blue. The faces of both were indistinct in the shadowy orchard. Slade began to light the Chinese lanterns that lay telescoped upon the grass.

After the introduction of a slightly shy Adela, Uncle Arthur turned to a wooden box in which reposed the pinwheels, flower-pots and Roman candles. Wicker chairs had been set out. Dr. Gedney seated himself in the dim light next to Mrs. Ventress with Bessie on his other side. The Chinese lanterns swayed to a slight breeze and hung like bizarre softly-glowing giant fruit from the glimmering boughs. Slade set off some red fire and came distributing sparklers.

Uncle Arthur attached a pinwheel and delivered himself of several of his odd exclamations as it stuck and spent its golden stream of fire upon the ground. Slade grinned. Presently the company were busy with the Roman candles.

Mrs. Ventress even lighted a nigger-chaser which imperilled her silk stockings. Coloured fire burnt about them,

smokily and vividly. Outside the illumination made by the fireworks the night upon the orchard was blue-black, silvered by the faint moon.

Dr. Gedney was a shy man. He had exchanged a few rather stereotyped remarks with Adela, always looking at her sideways, not seeing her very well. Bessie had rattled on at a great rate. Slade had been rather silent, absorbed in their entertainment. So had Uncle Arthur. After the fireworks faded they all seated themselves in the last glimmering of the lanterns. "Slade," said Uncle Arthur, "the ice-cream's on the back steps." "I'll help," said Bessie, jumping up. "And can't I?" asked Adela, rising. For answer Bessie reached for her hand. She nodded apology to the two men, who murmured something. Slade leading, Adela and Bessie picked their way up a shadowy and crunchy gravel path, and, in the light of the unshaded electric bulb in the ceiling of the back porch, found the freezer.

Slade's first attempt to disinter the ice-cream from its ice-pack was clumsy, and before he knew it a pair of firm white arms had taken his task away. His own hands, at the slight brushing touch, suddenly seemed enormous and ungainly. The scent of Adela's hair was upon his senses as she bent her head. She became very small, to be protected. He stepped quickly away from her. He stood regarding her as she knelt over the dasher, and began a practical skillful disinterment of the metal container of the ice-cream.

"Slade! Don't let her do that! She's not strong enough." Bessie was at the top of the porch steps, entering the kitchen for the cakes.

He came forward again, protesting, but Mrs. Ventress waved him aside. She could do it. Give her a chance.

A miller moth fluttered and blundered about the electric bulb above the porch steps. The nape of Adela's neck was white, the dark bronze hair above it strayed in two crinkly curls. Her white forearms tugged at the dasher.

Slade leaned forward and her face turned upward toward

him. Her eyes danced. "Beautiful ice-cream!" she said with mock awe. It came out really perfectly and was distributed to the plates Bessie had brought. Slade reached over and purloined a piece of less salty ice from the freezer. It bulged his cheek. He looked up at Bessie, now standing with a plate in each hand. His light hair curled moistly upon his forehead.

"With neatness and dispatch," remarked Slade.

"Yes, but Adela did all the work," said Bessie.

Slade was repentant. "I'm so sorry. You certainly did," he turned to Adela. She evidently wasn't listening.

She was standing on the lower step gazing out into the dark orchard. Her profile caught the light. Her brows seemed sombre.

"What?" she asked, turning toward him with the vague expression of a person interrupted in reverie.

"I say you were so quick I'm afraid I wasn't much help."

"What? Oh no! No indeed. But look, children!"

"What is it?"

"Just the moon!"

It had floated clear of silver-edged cloud, cloud that had long dimmed it. It glowed as bright as a fire-balloon above the massed mysterious shadow of the trees, round and buoyant. The night sky was a deep plum-blue. Adela had raised one arm, pointing toward it, her face lifted.

It lasted but an instant. Slade drew in his breath. His face looked puzzled. But Bessie's eyes were quick. She was glancing at him keenly. Meanwhile her friend had turned perfectly naturally and picked up a plate. Slade secured two. The next instant they were all on their way over the wet grass, Indian file, rejoining Dr. Gedney and Uncle Arthur.

In deep shadow they sat in a half-circle, eating ice-cream, pistache and vanilla, aware of the bright moon through black raggedly-silhouetted foliage. A silence held them, broken only by the tink of spoon on plate and the scratch of the match to Uncle Arthur's cigar.

Slade stood on the other side of Scamander under high dark battlements. On the broad height of those battlements a woman of silver walked in blue moonlight. In his mouth was a taste of blood and tears. In his heart was a murmuring of fire. The dark, blood-stained shadows of the plain were beautiful, beautiful as the strictness of a sword the metallic brilliance of the moon. Most beautiful the poise and sway of the woman who walked between earth and heaven, slowly and proudly.

A young, plantigrade, biped mammal—in trouble as usual.

Mrs. Ventress was laughing at him softly. “You *are* a thousand miles away. Your uncle asked you something.”

Uncle Arthur was leaning forward. “Eh, Slade?”

“I beg your pardon, sir. I didn’t hear you.”

“I was saying that the pinwheels were managed better this Fourth.”

“Not the one I watched *you* with. How about that one?”

“Oh, well,” returned Uncle Arthur. “Aren’t there exceptions to every rule?”

Both laughed.

Uncle Arthur resumed his smoking. Slade was sitting next to his Uncle Charles. Adela and Bessie on his other side were talking together in low voices. The ice-cream was finished. The sitters were blurred in shadow.

“Well,” said Dr. Gedney’s voice, “I think we shall have to go, Arthur. This has certainly been very pleasant. What do you think, Bess?”

“Yes, we ought to,” said Bessie, rising, after a murmur to Mrs. Ventress who answered it with an assenting murmur. She rose also.

“I’m very glad to have met you,” Uncle Arthur was all courtesy. “Bessie has told me——”

Bessie smiled to herself in the darkness. Slade moved past her toward Mrs. Ventress.

“Have a nice time?” asked his cousin, peering for his face.

“Great! Wasn’t it? (Good-night, sir!) Yes, I cer-

tainly did. Good night for a poem, isn't it. Something——"

He broke off. Dr. Gedney and Mrs. Ventress were ahead of them. He could hear his uncle answering a question in that shy, dry voice of his.

Of course she wasn't Trojan Helen at all. But what a beautiful gesture! And how darned nice and natural! What *had* her life been? Why had she looked so sad?

"Slade!" Bessie was lightly shaking his arm.

"Yeah—I'm sorry—what?"

"Don't push me off the path like that, that's all. Here's the gate."

"I *am* sorry."

"Thinking up your poem?"

"Uh—oh, no—I was just mooning, I guess. *Isn't* it a nice night?"

Bessie did not answer immediately. Then she said inconsequently.

"The moonlight's so bright on the road, I think I'll dance."

She was suddenly on ahead of them, running, twirling. If she had not been so graceful you might have called it capering. She skipped.

The Scythe hung low in the Eastern heaven, Regulus its bright star near the earth. The sky coruscated with an incrustation of stars. Up to them, up and up, glittered the Dream, beatific, solitary as their light. . . .

Bessie was waiting for Slade and the other two at Mrs. Ventress's gate. They were all mildly amused at her. There was persiflage. Adela thanked them all and said good-night. Bessie waved at her in an airy manner. Adela flirted her hand and smiled. Bessie wove a saraband ahead of the two men on the way home. Her father kept saying absently, "No, do come back here!" Slade seemed absent-minded. At the Gedney gate Bessie fell into step with them. "Ooh, I'm tired. Wasn't it fun though." She was a little breathless. "I *am* tired. I'm going right up. Good-night." She had disappeared when they entered the small hall.

She stood in the dark of her room, slowly undressing and regarding the China Animals. In the dark, she made a face at them. She moved over to the window and stood, her dark hair falling below her shoulders, regarding the now golden moon. She straightened her shoulders with a shrug, cocked her head.

"I don't care," she said, almost inaudibly.

She made another face at the China Animals before she knelt to say her prayer.

CHAPTER XII: THE CHRISTIAN MARTYR OF "THE COLOSSEUM"

SLADE journeyed back to the junction the next morning, where you caught the train for Philadelphia. Bessie had seemed to him a little odd at breakfast. Some new element had entered their natural *camaraderie*, or did he only fancy it? He didn't quite understand.

When the time had come to go down to the station she accompanied him naturally enough, in the rattly herdic, but she had little to say. She said good-bye with some humorous remark and urged him to come again soon, waved even, as the weathered old cars got under way and the windows began to pass. But there was something that his subconscious mind stored away, something puzzling.

Bessie was a clever child. He liked to be with her. She was vivid and refreshing. They had been companions off and on for a number of years, from the time when a youngster of fourteen had sat on the porch of the Gedney house (upon a certain visit his father and he had paid their cousins) drawing misshapen caricatures for the delectation of a black-eyed, black-haired infant of six. The infant of six had beamed upon him with whole-hearted appreciation of his amazing artistry. She was growing up fast, certainly. She was one of the few relatives he cared about. She was a nice child.

She certainly could draw, if he knew anything about it. How nice of Mrs. Ventress to help her! What *was* Mrs. Ventress's story? Wasn't she reticent about herself! How kind though, kind and beautiful. "Really one of the loveliest looking women I've ever seen in my life!"

A fantastic joke occurred to him that he would like to

write her. It referred to the ice-cream. It would amuse her. He could see her smile and the way her eyebrows went up even more. He could hear, faintly, her laughter. He wondered, innocently enough, whether she wrote an amusing letter. Sure to. . . .

* * *

Bessie was singularly quiet when she came to Adela for drawing on Tuesday. Teased gently as to her thoughts, she assumed a far-away smile that held the faintest touch of bitterness. She then favoured her older friend with a long candid glance. She then burst into a typically Bessieish fit of high spirits, and rattled off a lot of nonsense. But she did not answer directly any questions. She turned them off with the mischievousness of an elf. She was moody youth personified. Once she actually seemed to be trying to pick a slight quarrel with Adela over a discussion of illustrators. But she left the house waving a gay farewell.

* * *

Slade found the manuscripts piled up for him on his desk at The Colosseum office. The mousy Associate Editor hardly seemed aware of his absence or return. He was still hunting in the rat's nest of his roll-top for the papers he seemed always just on the point of finding—and never quite did. He was scratching his head in the same way, behind the ear; stalking into the office of the Editor-in-Chief to voice opinions on current politics in the same resonant accents, thence to return to the inextricable mixing of the papers upon his desk.

Slade departed that evening for his room on Charles Street in Greenwich Village, with a brief-case full of manuscripts he intended reading overnight.

* * *

The offices of The Colosseum Publishing Company were in a high building on the North side of Union Square, directly below the offices of a prominent collar company and above those of an Armenian Rug Firm. The gold-lettered firm-names of all three emblazoned the rather dingy stone

structure and called to you from across the Square. The rather cramped and rickety elevator, in which you ascended in charge of a lean and seedy individual, was quite behind the times so far as modern efficiency was concerned. It let you out in a narrow hallway, confronted by a length of plate glass behind which the accounting department fussed with its ledgers and comptometers. On your left a glass-panelled door opened upon an information desk and telephone switch-board in close proximity to the Cashier's cage. The further semicircular sweep of the enclosing counter held books displayed under glass. Beyond and behind it were various desks, back of them all the offices of the officers of the Company. Passing around the enclosing counter and to the rear, away from the tall south-facing windows on Union Square, you turned to your left again into a dark high-ceilinged hallway. The first spacious and portièreed door to your right admitted you to the reception room of *The Colosseum Magazine*. It was all impressive, the thick carpets under your feet made progress noiseless.

The offices were ancient, an antique legend haunted about their shape, immaterial trumpets seemed softly to bruit ancient fame from the four dusty corners of that high-ceilinged reception-room, so secretly placed in the very heart of this aloof and eminent publishing organization that its one small window, opening upon an air-shaft, was totally insufficient to provide it with illumination. All day through, winter or summer, a large shallow marble-white bowl hung upon four bronze chains above the center of the room, suffused gold-tinged reflected lighting, a subdued radiance inoffensive to the hallowed walls hung with the choicest work of now-eminent illustrators.

On your left, as you entered the doorway, stood a small brown-corduroy-upholstered sofa, catacornered between the door you had entered and the high wide entrance to the further realms of the Art Department. Across the room, directly in front of you, *in limine* of a further vista of large apartments, stood two desks. The one on the left-hand, in

full view against the wall, was a wide typewriter desk with a drop-light over it. The one on the opposite side of the vaulted entrance to the editorial rooms was a high roll-top tucked away in the corner by the air-shaft window and backed by a green-curtained book-case. These flanked the awe-inspiring vista of more soft-piled carpet under high ceilings, with glimpses of two desks in the editorial rooms beyond—and of the tall south windows beside them that again caught sight of the sky above the Square.

The atmosphere of the editorial rooms was a vatic silence, broken only by occasional soft footsteps, whisperings, rustlings of papers, and undertoned by the hum of distant conversation. The penetrator into these mystic precincts was bound to feel the unbidden awe steal over him.

At a flat-topped desk in the room beyond the reception-room, Slade sat all day, reading or editing manuscripts. Across the room sat Miss Peabody in her immaculate neatness of dress, with her pleasantly sardonic smile. She sat up very straight and read book manuscripts, while Slade read for the magazine. She knew exactly how to manage any man in the office. She had been known to remark that any man was shamefully easy to manage. Few could equal her sedate but withering scorn of the things she didn't like. Also there was always a mischievous look in her eyes.

Slade liked her for these things, and for the fact that his occasional outbursts, when manuscripts were turned down that he had wanted accepted, and *vice versa*, appeared both to amuse and please her. In a less childish and far more effective way she often herself besieged the Powers that Were. Her feeling for good writing was uncompromising and intuitive. Both she and Slade frequently held conferences of mutiny against some of the policies and predilections of the Editor and Associate Editor.

From nine in the morning till five in the evening, with an hour off for lunch which was frequently stretched to an hour and a half, Slade pored over the literary work of other people and secretly wrote an occasional verse. He was not

especially gregarious at lunch-time. Sometimes he called up Rafe who toiled in an advertising agency on 44th Street, and they met at some half-way point for a meal together. Sometimes he went out with a group of other men in the office. Sometimes he wandered alone over to Scheffel Hall on East 17th Street or up Broadway to Madison Square lunchrooms. At five o'clock he left the office, usually to walk home, though he quite as usually came to work in the morning *via* the Sixth Avenue "L."

* * *

Upon this particular hot afternoon he turned south on Broadway past Union Square, traversed 14th Street to Fifth Avenue and proceeded down that thoroughfare toward the Washington Square Arch, where the zone of high buildings sacred to silks, stockings, cloaks and suits became a district of lower buildings mixed with apartment houses and private residences, and marked off by two historic churches.

Young Breckinridge was slightly above the average height, fair of skin, blue-eyed, with close-cropped light brown hair. His clothes were never sufficiently pressed. His neckties displayed too great an affection for raw color. His fingers, that were now occupied with pipe-bowl and brief-case, bore stains of ink and nicotine. He was twenty-four. He had been with the *Colosseum* for four years. He had, within that time, risen from addressing envelopes and entering manuscripts to first reader of all manuscripts submitted, at a salary amounting to forty dollars a week. His features had a certain healthy and agreeable ugliness, and he needed to shave only every other day. His teeth were white and regular, his grin frank and pleasant. His eyes were always either absent-minded or amused. His temperament was essentially easygoing, with spasms of red rebellion, against everything, spasms that usually manifested themselves only in his poetry.

He and Rafe lived in two rooms upon the top floor of a tall, narrow, high-stooped brick house in the upper part of Charles Street. The smaller room was Slade's. There was

just space enough in it for a bed, a bureau and a diminutive, rickety-legged table. It had two doors, one at the head of his bed, opening directly on the dingy, dark, narrow hall, one near the window opening upon Rafe's larger room. Rafe's wider bed was made up like a couch in the daytime, with a worn imitation tapestry cover. Both rooms were lit at night by tattered redly-glowing welsbachs. In an alcove at the rear of Rafe's room was a washstand. At the front of the room were two windows, with a large writing table between, under the light. The street in the summer evenings was full of the wild din of all the children of the neighborhood at play. Later, when the children went to bed, the cats came out and started musical activities. The windows across the street always showed stout women in kimonos or bovine men in shirt-sleeves elbow-hunched upon the sills. The house always smelt slightly of mould and cooking vegetables. On the floor below them lived a Village dramatist who believed he was a Rosicrucian. In another cubby-hole hall bedroom in the rear on their own floor slept a Princeton man of their own ages who declaimed Homer in the original Greek every morning while dressing. His name was Jerry Callender, and he assisted in running the Book Review Section of a large metropolitan newspaper. As he had a wide circle of friends he was always out in the evenings. In the mornings, when all three were up and hanging over the stair-rail to see if the bathroom on the floor below was clear, they mutually indulged in song, dance and badinage. The Rosicrucian had filed several claims that this disturbed his mystic morning slumbers. But they were three against one.

This evening, when he had entered the dark first-floor hallway, at about a quarter of six, and mounted creakingly and with long-legged strides to the top and third floor, Slade found Rafe sprawled out upon his couch bed, reading "The Lake", by George Moore.

"H'lo," said Rafe.

"H'lo. You're early."

"Yeah. They turned that account over to Lapham after

all. Know what I mean? Made me sore. I got that bank stuff in shape to-day, but there wasn't much else to do. I quit at half-past four. Old Pooley was out and you could have fried eggs on his desk. Maybe that damned mouser Mitchell will chalk it up against me, but I don't care. Old Pooley likes my stuff and I don't soldier usually. . . . A-a-a-a-h!" Rafe raised his long corded brown arms and stretched with a grotesque yawn. "Why be a slave all your life. Damn advertising. It's the greatest lot of bunk in the world. But a man must live. Where you going to dinner?"

"I don't know. I've got some stuff to read to-night."

Slade had divested himself of coat and shirt and stood in a singlet lighting a cigarette in cupped hands. He threw the burnt match in the general direction of the window.

"Here, quit that! Who keeps this room clean? Defilin' house of refuge!"

"House of ill-fame," returned Slade grinning, and knelt upon the chest of the prostrate figure—whereupon the prostrate figure arose and wrestled with him.

But it was too warm. After a few seconds of grinning, gasping gripping of each other, swaying back and forth in unsuccessful attempts at a throw, they desisted. Rafe went back to the wash-basin and began soaking his head with a great splutter. Slade returned to his room, completely removed all apparel and wrapped himself in a towel-material dressing-gown. A moment later he was running a bath below.

"Hey!" Rafe shouted down the stair-well, "want to go over to Christine's?"

"Don't care," Slade yelled back. "Sure!"

Half an hour later they left the house together.

* * *

Slade returned to his hall-bedroom at about ten o'clock. He had broken away from a group who were going over to the Blue Horse on Christopher Street. As he climbed the stairs the tag-end of an economic argument between Burwash, a Socialist, and Edgren, who upheld something called

the sovereignty of the Ultimate Consumer, still rang in his ears.

"You mean to tell me," it was Burwash on the aggressive, "that for a hundred million people in close communication, the social organization originally intended for about one-sixth that number, loosely in touch, is suitable?"

"No, but——"

"If institutions don't accord with the facts of nature they result in revolution!"

"Yes, but——"

"To-day we have substituted the—the turbine for the paddle wheel, the telegraph and telephone for the ox-cart, and yet——"

"But you don't get me, Bur. What's the purpose of an industrial system anyway? To feed the ultimate consumer. And right to-day the ultimate consumer has a certain sovereignty over conditions as they are, if he knew how to use it. They aren't organised, that's all. The drift is out of productive and into negotiative occupations, and into an accelerated accumulation of interest-bearing securities. The shop-counter——"

"Oh, I know, now you're going into commercial credit. But I tell you that doesn't touch the root of it."

"And I say it does."

"Property is robbery!"

"Very likely; but don't forget the rest of Prudhomme. 'Possession is liberty'!"

"And we mean to get it——"

"But not in the right way. Over the shop-counter——"

The argumentative voices died away in Slade's brain. He entered his room and stood lighting the Welsbach while an "L" train groaned raucously on a far curve. It was very hot in the cubicle when the Welsbach was lit. A baby was crying like a saw in the crowded house opposite. A cat was meowing and rummaging in the garbage can. A kale and cabbage smell insinuated itself *via* the hall door, but it was too hot to close it. Slade opened his brief-case and took out some

manuscripts. He removed his damp soft collar and unbuttoned his collar button, turning the neck-band of his shirt under all around the neck. He donned a pair of horn glasses that made him look like an owl. He tilted his small chair back against the wall next the door to Rafe's room, which was open for coolness, and put his feet upon the table.

He stuffed and lit his Dunhill. With a sigh he began to read typewritten pages. Several manuscripts in covers stamped with the imprint of different agents he finally tossed upon the bed. He flipped open a third, after removing it from its envelope. It had evidently been sent in direct by the writer. It was typed neatly, but the top sheet was newly folded and stiff, while those beneath were far more worn and pliable. The thing was called "The Crystal Castle." Slade's eyes travelled down the first two paragraphs with only a gradually mitigating boredom. Then he began to read intently.

There was no sound in the room for fifteen minutes, except the occasional rustle of a page. Then the reader stirred, sighed, tossed the manuscript upon the table and scrapingly removed his feet therefrom. He arose and stood staring at the five-thousand word story, which he had carefully read through twice.

"Holy cat!" he muttered. "Holy cat!" He whistled softly.

He entered Rafe's room and ran the cold tap in the alcove. Reading under that Welsbach was warm work. He washed his face and let the water run upon his wrists. He poured a drink for himself in the glass he carefully rinsed. He returned to the room and again stood over the table, looking down at the manuscript and scratching his head. Then he settled himself and read it through all over again.

Rafe came in at 12:30. Slade was just finishing the rest of his stint. On the bed lay all the MSS. that had come home in his brief-case. Four short stories, two articles, ten poems. On the table reposed one lonely folded packet of typewriter-paper.

"Hey," exclaimed Slade, as his room-mate stood in the doorway, pretending to regard him with dour displeasure. "For God's sake read this!"

Rafe lounged in.

"Rejecting 'em, eh? Sort of policy worse-oh of the *Colosseum*, what?"

"Oh, my God," groaned Slade. "Have a heart, Rafe!"

His room-mate grinned rather sheepishly. He seated himself on the bed without more ado, supporting his feet upon the jutting brass handles of the bureau. He took the manuscript Slade tossed him.

He began with his head on the pillow and the typewritten sheets held on high. Rafe was a little far-sighted. He ended with his feet on the floor and his head bent over the story. After he had read the last word he sat staring at the page.

Then, "Damn good, isn't it?" he said laconically, and tossed the thing at Slade. "Damn good," he said again as he rose and stretched. "Certainly is. Who's it by?"

"That's just what I don't know," said Slade. "There isn't hide or hair of an address on it. Not on the envelope. Not on this. No envelope enclosed either. May have been. I'll see when I go down to-morrow. But *isn't* it good? My lord—where the fox-terrier stands up at the window. My *gosh!* Why, it's a wonderful yarn—and so beautifully written."

"Yep. Bet anything it's by a well-known man, though. Probably the agent'll ask you five hundred for it, or a thousand."

"But it didn't come through an agent."

"Didn't, eh? Well, it's by some well-known crab, anyway. You can tell. Yeah, it's a story you ought to use. Well, I shook that gas-bag Burwash finally. There was dancing down in the Blue Horse. You ought to have come."

"Not me. I stay at home and discover masterpieces."

"Oh, you do, do you, my young friend. By the way, what kind of a time did you have in Tupton?"

"Great. Met a wonderful person."

"What's her name?"

"Not so fast, old leather-face! Not so fast! Don't cultivate that stage humour."

"Well, what was it?"

Slade was standing in the doorway of Rafe's room emerging from the shirt that now lay across his arms.

"You ruffian!" was all he would answer. His grin was large and bland.

"You're too young, Slade," said Rafe from the alcove, foamily toothbrushing. His tousled head stuck out to scan his room-mate. "You're too pitifully young, kid. My Gawd, you need me along all the time. Who have you fallen for now?"

"Cut it," said Slade. "I told you this was a wonderful woman."

He walked over to Rafe's bureau and stood before the glass with one hand negligently upon his hip.

Rafe spluttered a laugh. "You did *not*. Wonderful *person* was what you said. Oh, la la la! They all flop some day!"

"What the hell do you mean?" asked Slade with a great pretense of wrath.

"Who? Me? My brand of light persiflage."

"Well, you're a damned old fool, Rafe. You ought to have seen her."

"Sally is all I want to see," returned Rafe. "Sally," he yelled suddenly, seizing a chair with which he began to pivot about the room. "Sally, I *adore* you! God, you ought to see that girl one-step!"

"Don't be an ass," said Slade. "You poor fish. I suppose you actually think you're in love!"

With vast superiority he entered his own room, "doused" (as he always expressed it) "the glim", and, after throwing the manuscripts in the general direction of the table, composed himself for slumber.

"So she's a wonder, is she," remarked Rafe in a loud con-

versational tone from his own couch, its gaudy cover now sprawling on the floor. He sat up, grinning at the wall between his room and Slade's. Histrionically he raised one hand to his ear to listen.

But there was no answer to his query, save a very bogus snore.

CHAPTER XIII: MS. BY ANON.

THE first thing Slade did next morning at the office was to make a thorough search through all his papers for one of those stamped, self-addressed envelopes usually inclosed by contributors. It refused to turn up. His questioning resulted in nothing. After he had described to her the nature of the manuscript, Miss Peabody became interested. Between them they had the editorial rooms ransacked. No luck. Slade took the manuscript in to the Editor-in-Chief, in one of the latter's spare moments unconfidential, and said what he thought of its excellence. He was so pressing that he actually left that notability reading it. Fifteen minutes later the Chief emerged excitably from his sanctum and came over to Slade's desk fluttering the typewritten sheets. "Accepted, Breckinridge," he called, in his voice so singularly boyish when contrasted with his somewhat elderly features. "This is excellent. I——"

"Hold on, sir," said Slade. "We can't find any trace of who wrote it." He explained in detail.

The Editor-in-Chief immediately had a second search instituted which covered exactly the same ground as the first, to the harassment of several underlings. It was, of course, unsuccessful. Manuscripts coming to *The Colosseum* were entered on cards upon their return or acceptance. For this reason there was as yet no card for "The Crystal Castle"—and no sign of a return envelope anywhere.

"Well, we shall just have to wait till the author comes in. He's sure to. You hold it, Breckinridge. I might be able to put a note at the end of the editorial section of the August number about the author communicating with us to hear something to his advantage. But no, we'd better wait—the

author is sure to inquire, and, after all, there's no great hurry. A fine piece of work, though!"

The impeccably-dressed Art Editor stood at that moment at the Chief's elbow. In his hand was a large drawing. Hovering in the background, its creator waited to be introduced, noting with some hidden amusement the dignified eccentricity of appearance peculiar to the widely-known Barrington Tudor Brush—"Old Toothbrush" or "Old T. B.", as he was flippantly referred to in many unconscionable studios.

Brush was an editor of the old school, an essayist of almost overpowering urbanity, an executive of great moral earnestness. To him the ancient routine of the *Colosseum* was invested with a sacred character. It had been with the greatest difficulty that Slade had finally prevailed upon him to install a card-filing system in place of the previous unwieldy ledger-method of entering and keeping track of manuscripts. The first assault upon this holy institution had resulted merely in long impressive soliloquies in which the immediate topic was expanded to the proportions of a fatherly lecture upon Slade's evidently radical sympathies in art, politics and sociology. Barrington Tudor Brush's face was set like flint (he said) against the increasing Lawlessness of the present day. Lawlessness was a favourite word upon his lip. Manners was another. He deprecated the decline of Manners. Somehow the idea of a card-index system at first filled his mind with earnest fears for the insidious penetration of Goth and Vandal into the high and austere citadel of the *Colosseum*.

It took a little time to work him round from this attitude. It took a deal of diplomacy to keep him to the single point. He had to be diverted from strayings-off into indictments of Nietzsche and irritated slaps at Socialism. With finger and thumb tips pressed lightly together, leaning back in his leather-cushioned swivel-chair, his heavy reddish-gray mustache fluffed out at the calf-bound works of James Russell Lowell that topped the high old-fashioned desk in the corner

of his sanctum, he would round and polish his periods with precise delight in the sound of his musically mellow voice. Slade found this particularly hard to bear whenever he received a summons to hastily review the merits of such manuscripts as he had reserved through the day as valuable enough for the editorial eye. Coming in promptly and sitting down promptly with a wire basket in your lap and brief but descriptive comments well-formulated in your mind, seemed to accomplish little.

"This article on the court of an Indian Maharajah," Slade might begin, "doesn't seem to me particularly well written, and——" But the word India was enough. There would follow a long and impressive discourse upon the Taj Mahal.

"Old T. B." was interesting too. That was the deuce of it. His memory held a brilliant accumulation of odd information, splendid material with which to make essays allusive and scholarly, encumbering mental lumber, however, so far as the egress of prompt, time-saving decisions was concerned. And yet the prime necessity of such decisions was a point constantly stressed.

"Save me time, Breckinridge. Editorial time is valuable. Give me that in a nutshell. Now—let's have it!"

But, when he had it (Slade often thought) he didn't know what to do with it.

"Well, I suppose I shall have to read all those myself. Get Miss Paxton to put them in my brief-case. A dog's life, Breckinridge, a dog's life. This multiplicity of manuscripts. No way that an editor can shift responsibility. Yes, well, suppose you return those poems. Is that all?"

And Barrington Tudor Brush was a stickler for little amenities in the office. "Always a good morning to everyone," he would enunciate distinctly. "We must always preserve the greatest punctilio toward our feminine assistants. The most complete courtesy in office relationships is indispensable. Manners makyth man."

Perhaps the next moment the official buzzer would rasp frantically in outer limbo. "Oh, Lord," Mrs. Swan would

moan, rising from her cluttered desk, "there he is again!"

He was a very nervous man, Barrington Brush. She would find him searchingly wildly upon his editorial table. "The shears, Mrs. Swan," he would ejaculate. "This has happened before. Someone is always taking my shears. . . . The memorandum for Mr. Aquamarine. Where is that memorandum?"

He had his periods of jocularly. They showed him suddenly, incredibly boyish, erupting with classical quotation and absent-minded chuckles.

He had a special small yellow pad upon which, day and night, he scribbled important memoranda addressed haphazard to any member of the office force upon any subject that happened to occur to him. These oracular leaves in pestilence-stricken multitudes fluttered about the ears of the outer office every day. Their injunctions were, however, completely forgotten as soon as written. Reference to them afterward evoked only a wild-eyed stare and then a wholly vague "Quite right, quite right!" Mrs. Swan had a private collection of these memorabilia in a japanned tin box. She took them out and read them over whenever she felt depressed. She had ceased paying the slightest attention to them some years before.

Brush was a man in his middle fifties, with nearsighted blue eyes behind strong-lensed gold-rimmed glasses. He was moon-faced, bald, and pink of complexion. He usually came to the office in a cutaway, on special occasions in a frock-coat. He was short, but held himself erect, and walked with an absent-minded scuffing step. He was always cleanly shaved save for the predominant reddish-grey mustache. He was much seen in quasi-literary society. He was fundamentally highly benevolent, and drawled.

Slade had grown genuinely fond of him, despite his peculiarities, rather because of them. Brush was rarely irascible, though frequently plaintive. He strove to consider and aid his subordinates. His editorial standards were of a high integrity, if of a strict, old-fashioned classicism. Miss

Peabody, with her fine taste but far more open mind, had proved a good influence upon him. She often had her own way in spite of him. In the present instance, "The Crystal Castle" had succeeded miraculously. Never before in Slade's experience had a manuscript of his own unhesitating choice been so quickly approved also by the editorial judgment. And this in spite of the fact that there were several passages in it Slade had feared——

Now he took it over to Miss Peabody's desk and stood holding it aloft as if in offering to the gods.

"A miracle," he said quizzically. "Behold a miracle!"

"What?" She looked up with clever brown eyes and the faint one-sided smile with which she always greeted her friends.

"T. B. likes this and so do I. Awfully. Ever know us to agree before?"

"Never. But I've been eavesdropping the loud editorial 'Yea!' So it's good, is it?"

"I hope *you'll* think so. I tremble."

"Well, this thing I'm reading is utterly atrocious. Besides, the anonymity charms me. I'll read it right away."

"Isn't it good!" she called across to him a moment or so later.

"Isn't it!" returned Slade. "Finished it?"

"Not yet. Wait a minute."

When she had, she arose crisply and brought it over to his desk.

"It's *darn* good," said Miss Peabody.

At that moment the telephone on Slade's desk rang sharply.

He nodded and grinned at Miss Peabody as he disentangled the receiver-cord.

"Hello. Yeah, this is Breckinridge. Oh, hello, Lin!"

"Yeah. Sure can. What time?"

"Who?"

"How do you spell it?"

"'Y'—not 'I'? Oh, I see. How quaint!"

"Sure I'd like to meet him. Sure, I'm supercilious. This is the *Colosseum*, isn't it?"

"Twelve-thirty? Right. I'll be there."

"Yeah. G'-bye."

* * *

Slade entered the Players' an hour later. "Mr. Jessup," he said, as he gave his straw hat to the rubicund mulberry-uniformed attendant. He looked down into the billiard room where smoke drifted and ivory clicked, and up the short stretch of stair to the main floor. Lin Jessup, thin, sallow-faced, hawk-eyed, his height of brow exaggerated by the fact that his sandy hair had receded from above his temples, came gangling down the few brass-treaded steps and shook his hand in a large loose grasp.

"Come up, fellow. I want you to meet this man Coryat."

A little later they were seating themselves at a table on the rear veranda, overlooking the inclosed court, having traversed the main room with its big leather lounge and, passing between glass cases of thespian relics, the shadowy dining-room where a few lunching groups gave them curious casual glances.

Slade thought Coryat interesting looking. He liked his lean brown face and the tilt of his nose. His green-blue eyes seemed cognizant of everything. His sandy mustache gave his face an indescribably foreign touch. Beside him Jessup looked, as Slade put it to himself, "as yellow as a lemon", and his lanky, loose-jointed body unusually awkward. Coryat sat up with nervous erectness, crumbling bread, Jessup hunched over the table, head sunk between narrow shoulders, chin stuck out.

"What'll you have, Coryat? I'll have the cold consommé and then the fish," he said to the waiter.

"Coryat's been doing some articles for us," Jessup explained. "We publish the first one next week. He thinks the *Colosseum* might be interested in a couple on another phase of the European situation. It's this—well, you explain, Coryat."

Richard began to do so. All three proceeded with their meal. In half an hour Slade was in possession of the whole idea and had promised to take it up with Mr. Brush and arrange to have Coryat come in and discuss it with him. After their coffee they wandered back into the main room and found seats on the big leather lounge that faced the fireplace. Jessup was called away to the telephone.

He returned a moment later. "I'm sorry. I have to go uptown. Don't you men hurry. Why don't you sit around a while? Hate to rush off this way, but I've got to."

"I'm sorry too. Maybe we *will* sit—for just a few minutes," said Slade. "So long. Thank you a lot, Lin." Coryat also made his adieus. "How did it come out?" asked Slade, as they reseated themselves. He had been listening to a war reminiscence. Coryat completed it.

"Yes, that *was* queer," said Slade.

"Speaking of anonymity, though," he went on, after a second, "we've just had a case at the office. And I happen to have the evidence—with me now." His left hand went inside his coat. "I brought it over, as a matter of fact, thinking it would interest Lin. Then I got so interested in what you were talking about—— Here it is. Careful of it—we think it's valuable. A remarkable story. Came in the other day without the slightest identification on it. We're holding it until the author remembers that fact or gets tired of waiting for us to return it, and comes in."

"Mind if I look at it?" asked Coryat.

"Not at all. I'd like you to. By the way—but no, I suppose that would be a bore. Only it *is* quite remarkable."

"What? Want me to read it? Now?"

"Would you? I'd really like an outside opinion on it. Sure it won't bore you?"

"Not a bit. Give me a minute or two."

He took ten.

Slade sat and smoked.

"Well, I'll be jiggered," remarked Coryat, softly.

"What?"

"Wait a minute. This *is* queer."

He finished the story rapidly, muttering unintelligibly every now and then.

He looked up and handed back the manuscript.

"I know the author," said Coryat simply.

"You *do*? How do you? Who is it?"

"It's a man named Terrill. He wrote only one book I know of, 'Golden Windfall'. It was published in England. It's very rare. In my opinion he's an undiscovered genius. I've tried to trace some facts about him, but I could find out precious little. His book was brought out by a small London firm that failed soon after. It got practically no notices. I talked to several critics in London about him last year. They'd never heard of him or of the book. I lent them the book. One of them, old De Sayyes, got really interested. He did some sleuthing. But one partner of the firm that had brought out the book was dead and the other was somewhere in Europe. None of those I interested could find out anything definite. The first and only edition of the book was small, and the remainders must be widely scattered. De Sayyes said something about it in his page in *The London Weekly*, but nothing has turned up yet. I'm hoping to get someone over here interested. We think the author died some years ago. At least, he's never appeared in literature again. But this manuscript—why, the man had an absolutely individual style. I could tell his fine Italian hand in the dark. This seems to me unmistakable. I could show you—if I had the book."

"Thought you said you did have it?"

"Silly of me perhaps—I lent my only copy to—to—a friend of mine. I'll have to wait till it's returned."

"You're *sure*—are you?"

"About who wrote this? Oh, I'm certain I couldn't mistake the style. It's as unmistakable as—as—Chesterton or—or Thomas Carlyle."

"Somebody imitating—but that doesn't seem reasonable

either, does it—with the writer absolutely unknown over here.”

“Oh, Lord, no——” Coryat stopped. His mouth remained slightly open, his brow wrinkled.

“What?”

Coryat’s lips closed. “Oh, nothing.”

“No,” he said slowly. “I don’t believe anyone could imitate Terrill as well as that. Even if it were a good imitation I think I’d know it. I’ve lived with his book too long. It’s *sui generis*. But I’ll swear he wrote this story. I’ll swear it. The point is—to find him.”

“Well this is certainly darned interesting,” said Slade. “I’ll have to tell old T. B. But surely, if it is this man Terrill, he’ll eventually turn up for his manuscript. Now, look here—will you give me his full name again and the name of his book?”

“Richard Terrill,” began Coryat slowly, “Golden Windfall——”

* * *

It was a number of days before Slade saw Richard again. In the meanwhile, between cogitations about the mysterious Richard Terrill, his thoughts recurred quite regularly to Adela Ventress. He had only seen her twice, but he found that he missed seeing her. There were amusing incidents arising out of his daily editorial toil and nightly jaunts around the Village with Rafe that he found he wanted to share with her. There was the incident of the anarchist in the crumpet-shop on Christopher Street, there was the incident of Mr. Spofford, the Associate Editor’s falling asleep in his chair and sliding under his desk at three o’clock of a rainy afternoon; there was the incident of the three small boys and the baffled sandwich-man, which had amused him one morning as he hurried up the northwest side of Union Square; there was—above all—the incident of the Mysterious Manuscript. But there was no excuse for writing Mrs. Ventress, at least no proper excuse that he could think of.

And, after all, why should he want to write to her? Oh, I don't know!

Slade had retailed to the impressed Barrington Tudor Brush all that Richard Coryat had vouchsafed about the author named Richard Terrill. Brush had called up several rare book dealers and collectors of his acquaintance, and the New York Public Library. The only thing he discovered was, from the New York Public Library, after some research, the name of the original publishers of the book—which Coryat had already communicated to Slade. The New York Public Library had no copy. Brush dictated several polite and affable communications of generous proportions to eminent literary friends in England. With properly dignified circumlocution he approached them for any possible knowledge they might have of the book. These letters were duly typed, signed and dispatched, after having been transferred by imprint into the ancient blotter letter-books of the "Colosseum", amid whose undecipherable tissue sheets it had grown utterly impossible to find any given communication at any given time in any such state of preservation as could render it useful for reference.

As for the mysterious manuscript, it was locked in the safe. Coryat kept the appointment Slade had made for him with Barrington Tudor Brush. He emerged slightly pale beneath his tan, after a protracted interview. Nevertheless, he was to submit a first article, and he had impressed the Editor-in-Chief with the potential value of his own work and the indubitable value of that of Richard Terrill—whoever *he* was. Not to speak of the interesting mystery of the latter.

Meanwhile, as has been noted, Mrs. Ventress recurred. She remained like the memory of a familiar tune somewhere in the back of Slade's brain. Once or twice, out of a blank day-dreaming, a startlingly photographic image of her would amaze his mind. Bending over the lobelia in her garden, standing on the steps of Uncle Arthur's back porch pointing at the moon. Slade began to plan another visit to Tupton.

CHAPTER XIV: CORYAT CAN'T REMEMBER

A WEEK had passed when Coryat called Slade on the 'phone.

"Can't you have dinner with me tonight? You live down in the Village, don't you? By the way, what luck about Terrill—any?"

"Sure; that'll be fine," Slade answered the first question. "Terrill? No. The mysterious author hasn't turned up yet. Still, you know, it hasn't been so long. How about Christine's? Ever been there? Let this be my party. I'll see if I can get my room-mate to come along, can I? Like you to meet him. What time do you say?"

As certain exigencies of make-up would keep him late that day at the office, he agreed to join Coryat at his Gramercy Park apartment about 6:30. Meantime, he 'phoned Rafe and found that "demon of advertising" had a date with Sally Pasquale for dinner at The Black Cat. Sorry he couldn't join them. Like to meet this fellow. What's his name? Oh, yes, you told me. What are you up to? Going to sleuth the author of the "Crystal Castle"? Hope you find him. Ask him if he can write good copy for air brakes, if you do. I can't. Want to hear about the Swenson Axle? No? Want to hear about Rubbitonya the Tony Talcum? No? Well, well, well, what *do* you want to know, young fella? After several normally gratuitous insults, exchanged in genuine affection, Slade snicked the receiver back, grinning.

About seven o'clock he piloted Coryat down MacDougall Street and they climbed the steep, gloomy stairway, from the equally gloomy doorway next the livery-stable theatre of the Provincetown Players. The door above was opened on

smoke and noisy chatter. The long tables nearest held bantering groups of oddly assorted habitués of the Village. "Mamma" presided with her usual abundant good-nature. You helped yourself to stew and bread-and-butter and coffee. Slade spoke to several acquaintances. He procured the necessary viands for Coryat and himself. Threading their way through the intensely conversational diners, they found a blue-painted table for two near the front of the room, under posters of the Barbarian's Ball and Harry Kemp's Minetta Lane Theatre. They began to eat and talk.

The conversation drifted to the unfair sex finally. It usually does. Though Slade was some ten years younger than Richard Coryat, they met upon fairly equal terms until they touched this topic. Coryat was not the type desirous of impressing people with his experiences in knocking around the world. He simply retailed the most interesting of them quite naturally, with amusing comment. Slade had grown, through his magazine experience, to be a good listener. He was also well-read and well-informed. The questions he asked, the interpolations he made, were to the point. He too was interesting as well as interested. But he brought up the subject of Mrs. Ventress rather naïvely.

"I met a remarkable woman on my vacation—Fourth of July," he said so seriously, digging his cigarette butt into the china saucer of his cup, and frowning with such gravity that Coryat had to check a twitch of the lips. "A remarkable woman," he repeated, raising his head and staring at the opposite wall. In an older man the statement would have been accepted with the proper serious interest usual between acquaintances, but the thought and feeling working in Slade suddenly showed through his eyes in worshipping youthfulness. As suddenly something appealing about it touched Coryat and he kicked himself inwardly for his desire to laugh. After all, he remembered Jane.

"Who was she?" he asked gravely enough.

"That's a mystery too—rather," said Slade, still staring at the wall. "No one in Tupton—this town where my

Uncle lives—seems to know exactly who she is. She used to live in New York. She's come out there for the summer——"

Coryat's eyes roved from corner to corner of the low ceiling in sudden thought.

"What's her name?" he asked.

Their eyes met.

"Why—why it's—she's a Mrs. Ventress. I believe her full name's Adela Ventress. You don't know her, do you?"

"No, not at all," Coryat shook his head. "Never heard of her."

"Do you know anyone in Tupton? I didn't know you did."

"I don't. Just a thought. Go on."

"There's *some* woman on his mind. That's certain," thought Slade.

"Look here, don't think me impertinent, but you sound as if you were—oh, well—never mind. Excuse me," he said aloud.

"As if I were—what?" Coryat had flushed a little. But he was smiling.

"Oh, no. Only that's the second time."

"Second time what? What do you mean?"

Still he was smiling.

"Oh, I was going to say second time you've been speculating about somebody. But *I'm* sorry. None of my business."

Richard laughed, though his colour had slightly deepened.

"No I'm not. Well it is—— No, indeed I'm not."

His laugh was just a trifle forced. It was he, now, who looked boyish. But the man-of-the-world expression returned almost immediately. With the colour a certain light seemed to fade from his face.

"Always think I might know people. I've knocked around so much. That's all. Go on."

"Oh, well," said Slade. "Nothing much."

He too had withdrawn into his shell.

"Fine woman, that's all. She's teaching my young cousin drawing. I was rather impressed by her." This last with the transparent disinterest affected by youth. "I've just been wondering what her story could be, that's all. You know how you meet—well, interesting people."

Coryat guarded his voice. And then he too was thinking of an interesting woman he had met—oh, very!

"I know," he said. He thought of speaking of Flora; and then he thought he wouldn't. Nice kid, Slade, but still—He was continually wondering these days where the deuce Flora *had* gone. He had even inquired by telephone of her publishers. If they knew they were not giving out her address. They must know, but evidently had their instructions. He did not feel that he ought to pursue the matter.

"Very beautiful, though," said Slade absently, and startled him. The very words had been in his mind. It irritated him too, slightly. Here he was mooning exactly like this boy.

"Very beautiful," murmured Slade to himself, sipping his coffee. "Oh, well," he looked up with an entirely charming expression. "The devil, aren't they?"

"What?—*women*?" returned Coryat, entirely disarmed, highly amused. "Yes, my son, they're very likely to prove so."

"Yes, I guess so," contributed Slade with a certain nonchalance. "But, by golly, I've *got* to see her again!"

He sat inhaling his Fatima. His smile was saved from fatuousness by his youth. Coryat laughed openly now and Slade joined him, a trifle ruefully. "Oh, well," he remarked detachedly, "you must think me an awful ass."

"No," returned Coryat, considering. "On the whole I don't. There have been times," he added, with amusement in his eyes and voice, "when I've felt that way myself."

His face relapsed into seriousness. It seemed older. His eyes strayed over the cutlery-clinking groups about them.

"We-el," he said slowly, "you think I'm speculating about somebody. I am. About several people, in fact. No, it's

not you (he answered Slade's eyes). Some day I might tell you *my* story. You say you wonder what your new friend's is. Her name was—why, good Lord, just *what* did you say her name was?"

To tell the truth he surprised himself quite as much as he did Slade. A memory had suddenly clicked into place, in the eerie way of memories. It seemed preposterous of him to have forgotten that name.

"Gosh," said Slade with round eyes, "That *is* funny of you. It was Ventress. Adela Ventress."

"How do you spell it?"

"Why, V-e-n-t-r-e-double-s, so far as I know."

"Is it? Isn't it? Do you know, *I don't really remember!*"

Richard Coryat was undoubtedly looking queer.

"To—think—that *I don't really remember,*" he repeated, his chin cupped in his hands. He sank his forehead for a moment between them, his hands ruffling his hair.

"What do you mean? What is it? I'm all at sea, old man. What's up?"

Slade was concerned. Coryat raised strange absent-looking eyes, staring at him.

"No. I—can't—remember," he said slowly, shaking his head. "Ventress. Ventress. *Was* it that? Ventress. Ventress."

"I'm awfully sorry if I——" began Slade. Then, as suddenly as the fit had fallen, his companion resumed composure.

"No. Oh, no! That's all right," he stated, with a slight tremor in his voice. "I was just trying to recall something—it's that I once knew a name that I can't quite remember, that must have been something like that. It's a long time ago. It gets so mixed up. Good heavens, what a queer life! No—of course, it couldn't have anything to do with that. Nothing at all. It couldn't possibly have any connection."

"I'm just thinking aloud. Don't think I'm crazy," he added, now with quite a normal smile, "It's nothing I can ex-

plain, but there's nothing you need worry about. I've been rather—oh, well—sorry! Shall we take in that Provincetown place?"

"Why, yes—let's," returned Slade slowly. He was still rather bewildered by Coryat's agitation, and his poetic imagination was at work. Slade was an ingrained romantic. He went down the room to pay "Momma", while Coryat followed.

"You certainly do make a fellow curious, though," said Slade, as they began descending the stairs together. "You gave me a considerable start."

His companion put his head back and expelled air from his nostrils sharply with a slight but ironically mirthful sound.

"Too bad. I suppose I must have. But after all, I haven't had as strange a life as you might imagine from that. Still ——" He shrugged decisively and changed the subject to a discussion of Eugene O'Neill. Next door, without purchasing season tickets, they managed to get seats for the several one-act plays then running.

"Look here," said Coryat, as they parted several hours later at the 'bus terminus on the south side of the Square, the writer of foreign articles having declared for a ride home up the Avenue, "look here, don't think of me as a man of mystery or anything like that. The man of mystery you want is this man Terrill. Keep me informed if anything turns up, won't you?"

"I certainly will," said Slade. "I certainly will. No sign so far. But I'm going to try to get another week-end at Tupton sometime soon. I need a complete change, don't you think," he laughed, "from all these peculiar circumstances?"

Coryat smiled. "Well," he said, "take care of yourself."

"Oh," said Slade, laughing again, "no fear, thank you. You ought to see her though. She's a corker. I've talked rather like an ass I'm afraid. Well. It's been a fine evening. Thanks a lot for your company. We must do this again."

"We must," returned Coryat, swinging up on the frog-green 'bus. "Good night. Good luck!"

* * *

It was another week, the twentieth of July, to be exact, before Slade had manœuvred old T. B. into a position to grant him a week-end off. Letters from Slade's parents, who had been for a year in Nevada, Slade's father being a mining engineer of some prominence, opportunely assisted him. They contained certain affectionate inquiries, on his mother's part, as to the well-being of "your Uncle Charles", "your Uncle Arthur", and "little Bessie". His father, furthermore, wanted to know, though the matter was not pressing, if Arthur had yet tried his, Mr. Breckinridge's, prescription for hay-fever, and whether he had yet made up his mind to visit them when the Breckinridges returned to Long Island thus autumn.

His father always wrote with his tongue in his cheek, and his letters both teased and amused Slade. They invariably ended with the words "Your respectable father," above a copperplate signature. This terminology was a pleasure of long standing to the elder Breckinridge. Its inception had been several protracted arguments a year earlier upon the status of labour and the future of modern social movements. Slade was rebellious and eager, his father intelligent but disillusioned. "You have more faith in human nature than I have, my son." His father had managed men under stress. Slade had not. His father's mind was packed with practical instances, historical parallels. Slade fulminated from the latest books of Bernard Shaw, H. G. Wells, Thorstein Veblen, and from articles in "The New Republic".

Unfortunately he could only quote, rather patchily. He did not possess the dialectical power of the authors mentioned. Against them his father quoted Montaigne, Gibbon, James Bryce, John Stuart Mill. He also fell back on W. H. Mallock, whose sociology Slade derided with the burning scorn of a true Shavian. Nevertheless, in historical purview, statistical corroboration and the concrete instance, Slade

came off badly. But the force of his insurgence was fundamentally emotional and, though he were beaten in argument, he *felt* that his father was wrong. There was a spirit——! He opposed a fighting optimism and abundant energy of imagination to his father's dry experiences of the working out of ambitious schemes in the hands of erring humanity. It was the eternal antagonism of disillusioned age and electrically potential youth.

They had sat across the fireplace from each other in the long, low-ceilinged Long Island library, conversing late into the night. Slade had a genuine love and respect for his father. This tempered the asperity of some of their more clashing encounters. His father had a sense of humour and the philosophic cast of mind, adumbrating opinions formed a generation earlier. In spite of his decidedness he could conduct long arguments in the abstract without recourse to personalities. They usually ended by differing completely upon every main point at issue without, however, losing interest in each other. This is not to say that they did not sometimes find each other an irritation and a considerable trial. But they agreed to differ. Mr. Breckinridge's attitude toward Slade's future was, "Well, you've got to find out. Go and see." Meanwhile he accepted in jocular fashion the hypothesis that his son was a bomb-and-torch radical and he himself the epitome of aristocratic respectability. Occasionally he sent Slade communications written in red ink, addressing him as "Comrade" and referring to startling plots brewing against the "craven capitalists". Yet, as a matter of fact, whatever exasperation with the social order Slade evinced he inherited direct from his forebear, who had early renounced all established religion and had always ordered his own life according to the demands of his own nature.

Mr. Breckinridge regarded his relations and his wife's relations with a tempered amusement. He regarded the human spectacle not without kindness but with a keen appreciation of the absurdity of many conventions, the trivi-

alty of human aims, a delight in the extraordinary working-out of unanalysed human passions. His cool, detached temperament derived much sustenance of enjoyment from the antics of the actors in the human comedy.

Old T. B., thought Slade, might have irritated the elder Breckinridge, but he would have been sure to furnish him *taciturn* delight. Slade now approached his Chief in the matter of a short leave of absence, with tact, and, it must be confessed, a quite self-interested appeal to the really very kindly heart of Barrington Tudor Brush. It was represented that there were certain definite commissions that Slade must discharge in person on behalf of his far-distant parents. They concerned the future well-being of his most immediate relatives. The impression was urgently conveyed. Old T. B. capitulated. It was arranged that Slade should leave on the next Friday and need not return until the following Tuesday. So on Friday, the twentieth, he turned over certain important manuscripts to Miss Peabody, drawing a long face of regret which did not impress her in the slightest, joined her upon a short excursion into per-siflage, beamed upon and gesticulated farewells at everyone in the office, with the exception of Mr. Spofford who was, as usual, closeted with Mr. Brush inveighing against the latest demands of the A. F. of L., and hastily departed, with incredibly battered suitcase, for the Pennsylvania Station.

His train left for Philadelphia at eleven o'clock. He would arrive in Tupton at eleven that night. Uncle Charles would not mind. He always sat up reading until after twelve, and Slade could have found the Poplar Street house in an eclipse. It was no walk at all for a young man, from the station. To-morrow then, Saturday, he might see her. He began to go over certain things they had talked about. Her mystery enthralled him again, as the long, sluglike surface-car slid, clanged and hissed its airbrakes up Broadway.

CHAPTER XV: "I AM RICHARD TERRILL"

IT was the next morning, Saturday, at 9:30, that a woman stood hesitatingly on the threshold of the reception room of *The Colosseum*. Her figure still showed lines of youth. Her face was pale but attractive. She held her head erect, as though confronting danger. Bright eyes, pleasant features. Under her hat, a glint of bronze on soft hair. She carried a black leather brief-case.

She came tentatively into the open, from between the long dark-red portières. She glanced at the shut glass-panelled door on her right, at the wide open doorway to the domain of the Art Department on her left. She proceeded toward the imitation-mahogany typewriter-desk under the green-shaded, gold-nimbussing droplight. Behind the desk sat a young woman with fluffy yellow hair, horn glasses, and a white shirtwaist. She was typing cards.

She looked up and smiled pleasantly as the stranger stood in front of her. "Yes?" she inquired.

"I—I should like to see one of the editors. I sent in a manuscript some time ago——"

"Certainly. Won't you," indicating, "just wait a moment. Someone will see you——"

The visitor retired to the corduroy-upholstered sofa. The yellow-haired girl finished typing in their proper columns "6/3/20", "S.B.", "6/5/20" under the column headings "REC'D", "READER", "RET". The title of the ill-fated manuscript and the name of the ill-starred author had already been entered as "*Beneath the Weeping Willow*"—*Mignon Foley—Verse*.

The yellow-haired girl flipped her card from the machine. She arose and vouchsafed a languid remark about

the weather to her companion in outer darkness, the square-visaged kindly-looking elder woman behind the roll-top, who was estimating costs on the August number and munching a peppermint. She turned toward the awe-inspiring vista of the editorial rooms and the woman sitting nervously upright on the sofa saw her cross toward the left, inside.

"Somebody to see the editor. Will you see her, Miss Peabody? Mr. Breckinridge isn't here you know."

"Yes, I know. Just a moment. One minute. I'll be there."

The yellow-haired girl departed with this information. Having delivered it, she sat down, inserted another card in her Underwood and rattled off "*His Proper Sphere*"—*T. F. Zalinski—Fiction*—

Miss Peabody advanced from the inner room. Her crisp and cleanly presence had always reminded Slade of freshly-cut sweet-peas. She usually wore a high jabot collar to her handkerchief linen shirtwaists. Even in the present late July heat they did not wilt. Miss Peabody's nose was prominently aquiline, her smile delicately satiric. Her dark eyes surveyed you with frank interest. Her dark-brown hair was dexterously and attractively arranged, never straying. She had a dash of New England and a Puckish strain often overcoming much natural dignity. Her eye was keen for character. All sorts of people interested her. She greeted the woman on the couch with entire naturalness, and sat down beside her. "I am the Dragon's assistant," she said, smiling with a gleam of white teeth. "What can I do?"

The woman on the brown corduroy sofa clasped and unclasped her hands. She looked up at Miss Peabody intently, enlarging her eyes. She moistened her lips with a minute pink tongue-tip. She reminded Miss Peabody, somehow, of a stray kitten.

"I submitted a manuscript some weeks ago," she said softly. "I haven't heard. I wondered whether you could tell me——"

"What was the title of it?"

"‘The—The Crystal Castle’. It just occurred to me this morning that, in retyping my first page, I might have forgot to put my name and address on it. You—you see, it’s been around so often before—though not lately—it got so shabby. I—I didn’t have an envelope at the time to enclose for return, but I inclosed stamps. Anyway, I am quite sure," she added, with a disheartened glance, "that—that it won’t be available; so I thought I’d come for it. Have you seen it?"

Miss Peabody had been scanning her face intently.

"Why, of course I’ve seen it," she said slowly, her eyes still trying to analyse the woman’s character. She smiled too, for she found much appeal in that face. "Of course I’ve seen it. We all think it remarkably good. But there’s a point, you see. One of the Noted Sex," she smiled feministically, "has—has—well, did you submit it for somebody else, perhaps,—or did you write it?"

"I wrote it," said the woman simply.

"Well, I’ll tell you—do you mind waiting? Mr. Brush the editor would like to see you about it, I’m sure. I know he wants to accept it—if—well there are several points he would like to talk over with you. Will you wait just a minute?"

"Oh—oh, surely," murmured the other. Colour had come back into her cheeks. Yet her eyes stared. "You think there’s really—he really likes it?"

Miss Peabody had risen. "Why of course," she said. "It’s a beautiful piece of work. But you know that!"

"Yes, of course I do know," murmured the woman. "But you know—most magazines——"

A few moments later she was entering the *sanctum sanctorum*.

"A-ah, Miss, Miss—I am afraid I didn’t quite catch your name—aah, won’t you sit down," said Barrington Tudor Brush, rising as Miss Peabody ushered the visitor in.

"I beg your pardon," said Miss Peabody, "I completely forgot to ask it?"

"Cole," said the visitor. "Ann Cole."

"Aah—er—I see. Well, won’t you sit down, Miss Cole."

Right there," said the Editor-in-Chief. "That's it. Aah—er—thank you, Miss Peabody. Thank you very much. Now—aah—er—Miss Pole; no, Cole you said, Cole, Cole; yes, exactly, aah—er—well, the fact is Miss Cole, the fact is that—er—it's a very good story now, isn't it?"

The great T. B. was functioning in perfect form.

Miss Cole's somewhat strained face took on a puzzled expression. There was a slight twitching of the corners of her mouth.

"I was, in fact, greatly impressed by that story, Miss Cole. There are one or two points about it. Aah—as I remember it, several misspellings and a prepositional ending. A prepositional ending, you know, Miss Cole, is very unfortunate, and so easily avoided—something the true stylist shrinks from. But the story has impressed me, I must say,—has genuinely impressed me. Now, I must ask your indulgence, Miss Cole. There is another point—there has been a person—well, in fact, Miss Cole, there has been a suggestion—. I suppose you have never heard of a writer—an Englishman—named Richard Terrill?" the great T. B. finished.

He was sitting, knees crossed, plumply filling his round-backed upholstered desk chair. His pepper-and-salt suit was deeply wrinkled around the vest. His near-sighted blue eyes blinked at her through the gold-rimmed spectacles. The back of his plump right hand drew her eyes to its pinkness as that hand judicially stroked his fluffed-out reddish mustache.

There was no denying the flush that had come to her cheek at the mention of Terrill. It was momentary but distinct. Her lips opened and closed. Her eyes seemed to widen in that way they had.

"I see what you mean," she said. "You think I have stolen from Richard Terrill."

Directness always confused T. B., and dismayed him a little. There was something in candid abruptness that reminded him of the Decline of Manners. He waved both

hands in intended affability. He pointed his ruddy chin high and caressed his mustache with fervour. He brought his feet down square upon the floor and leaned forward in an earnestly confidential manner.

"Not at all, my dear lady, not at all," said old T. B. "Not for an instant did I intend any such implication. I only heard that the man existed a short while ago. I merely desired to know whether by any chance——"

A small but peculiarly grim smile came to Miss Cole's face, a smile that did not part her lips. The pupils of her eyes revealed secret mischief.

"Well, you see, Mr. Brush, I *am* Richard Terrill," said the lady, leaning forward also.

"My *dear* lady, why I think it astounding enough for you to manifest acquaintance with the work of this writer, of whom I heard only very recently through the friend of one of my assistants. Aah—er—I believe he is the author of but one book, and that an exceedingly rare volume. At all events I have never chanced upon it myself and have so far been unable to locate it in New York, though I have been in touch with several of the rare book-dealers and book-collectors. But really, my dear lady, it is a certainty in the opinion of this friend of my assistant's, whose name I need not divulge, that the author of that volume, and, through extreme similarity of style, the author of this story we hold, is one and the same person—and a *man*. Hence you will see——"

It was rather tortuously presented, but Ann Cole saw.

"The book you refer to is 'Golden Windfall'," she said with composure. "It was published in England five years ago, Swain and Higgins, five hundred copies. I wrote it under the name of Richard Terrill. I wrote the story you have in your safe. *I am* Richard Terrill. There is no other."

She was emphatic.

"But my dear lady, are you *sure*?"

Once an idea was in his head, T. B. could be exasperating about any effort to change it.

Miss Cole's voice trembled slightly. She bit her lip.

"Perfectly. Really, I ought to know."

"But—aah—er—my dear Miss Cole, I have never seen you before you know. I should be extremely glad to accept you as the author of the story——" He turned to his desk and possessed himself of the manuscript Miss Peabody had forethoughtedly exhumed for him, "I haven't the slightest doubt—not the slightest doubt——" he waved at her as he discovered the first glimmer of balefulness in her eyes. "I haven't the slightest doubt that what you say is true. I simply must have some means of identification. You doubtless possess contracts, letters, all that. If you will be so kind as to let me see——"

"I can prove it," said Miss Cole. She said it calmly enough. "Yes, that will be the best way. Yes. I am glad you like the story. I think it is good myself. I will bring you the proof—sufficient proof that I wrote both it and 'Golden Windfall'."

She rose. Barrington Tudor Brush also rose. He bent toward her from the waist. He extended his hand. Her tight little nervous grip closed upon his kindly but rather flabby one. She was gone, quickly, decisively.

She left Barrington Tudor Brush rather at a loss. He sat down in his round-backed chair again and stroked his mustache. He blinked through his glasses. He did not really believe that neat little person. He had already visualised Richard Terrill. If Richard Terrill *were* still alive he was short, ruddy, mustached, his heart and his manner charmingly youthful. He bowed from the waist. He was urbane and most certainly executive. . . . No, he could not see Miss Ann Cole writing "The Crystal Castle". Where had she come from? Who was she? True, she had known all the details that he knew or that Coryat knew about "Golden Windfall". But then—there was the Library. They had given him those bare facts. She might even be em-

ployed at the Library. She might know in some way——. Good Heavens, for all his urbanity and executiveness, he had forgotten, completely forgotten to ascertain her address! He bounced into the outer editorial room.

"Miss Peabody—aah—er—did you take Miss Cole's address?"

"Why, no, Mr. Brush, I thought she had left it with you."

"Has she gone? Can't you run after her to the elevator or—or something. An oversight. We decidedly should have taken her address. We know so little about her. I don't really think, you know——."

But Miss Peabody, rising without appearance of haste, had vanished through the reception-room into the hall. She returned without haste but swiftly. "I'm sorry, Mr. Brush——"

"Aah—well, well, never mind. You know I don't really at all believe that young lady——"

"She stopped at my desk just a second," said Miss Peabody, "and then she went out so quickly, saying she was coming back on Monday——"

"I know. She is to bring some means of identification. But really, Miss Peabody, I——though it's quite extraordinary——"

He stood by Miss Peabody's desk for a moment or so, while she deftly drew from him just exactly what Miss Cole had said.

"No," said Miss Peabody. "You know I am inclined to believe that she really did write it."

"But we really know nothing about her, and it would seem too extraordinary——"

"Well, we'll know on Monday anyway," said Miss Peabody briskly, adjusting her desk-light, since the sultry day outside had darkened for storm, and dropping her eyes to the pile of manuscript before her. Barrington Tudor Brush wandered absent-mindedly back into his office.

* * *

Miss Ann Cole had paused in the doorway of the building that housed the *Colosseum*, the Armenian rug firm and the New York branch of the famous Collar Company. The sky was dark over Union Square and the heat of the day was stirred by a rising breeze. It was going to storm and pour. Her best plan was to hurry over to the Sixth Avenue "L" at 18th Street. She could make it, she thought, before the rain. Then she could scuttle, when she descended at 8th.

She turned west toward Broadway and took the corner there. She had brought no umbrella. Just opposite a bakery lunch room she started and almost halted.

A man was swinging toward her, a man in straw hat and heather-mixture cheviot, wagging a light wanghee cane. His face was lean and brown, with a deep but not prominent jaw and a somewhat broad and uptilted nose. He was not looking at her. He was gazing reflectively at the pavement, striding deliberately. Several people, going Miss Cole's way, intervened between them. Now he suddenly tilted his head upward and back and directed an intent glance at the cornice of a building across the street. Then his head came down. Then he jerked it up again. He swung his stick. He had passed.

Involuntarily she whirled upon her heel. She had a glimpse of his back as he turned the corner. She bumped into a Roumanian shopkeeper who had stepped out of his store in his shirt-sleeves for a breath of the cooler air now blowing. She apologized dazedly and crossed the street, hurrying along 18th Street, her face burning. Traffic blocked her on Fifth Avenue. As she waited, her mind raged. He must have seen her—he must have seen her. The traffic jarred to a halt. She scurried across the Avenue. He must have seen her. She passed along beneath gloomy high buildings of a sooty grey. He must have known who she was. Finally, toiling up the high iron-bound elevated stairs, with the first grumble of the summer thunder in her ears, the thumping of her heart seemed a louder, more

menacing sound by far. She squeezed into a fissure between two fat Jewesses, on the varnished wicker seat; gates clashed, the train's first jerk set them all swaying.

Miss Ann Cole clutched her black brief-case and stared at the Sealect car-card opposite, without seeing it. She envisaged also a gaudy parrot and did lip service to the legend, "A Parrot can Say, 'Just As Good'". Shac. Fermillac. Nujol. Mazola. Rinso. She shook her head slightly. She compressed her lips. He *must* have known her. He *must* have known.

"*Eight Street!*" emitted the conductor, between a yelp and a groan.

As Miss Cole stepped out from under the hooded "L" stairs, the first rain was falling. Scuttling was in demand. She scuttled. When she had climbed the stairs to her dingy room and removed her hat, whose protection by the newspaper she carried had not been altogether complete, she shook out her skirts and sank into the one easy-chair by the window. She stared out on red brick and dusty leafage pattered upon by the soft surge of the rain. It increased. It hissed in the court below. It filled the room with a cool earthy smell. It descended steadily. Endless and grey. . . .

* * *

Richard Coryat came briskly into the reception-room and paused before the yellow-haired girl still typing cards. "Mr. Breckinridge?" he asked.

"He's gone for the week-end. I'm sorry," said Miss Hudson.

"Maybe I could see Mr. Brush then. . . . Mr. Coryat," he supplied, as her mouth opened for a question.

He found the great T. B. looking somewhat distraught.

"Well, well, Mr. Coryat,—yes, how are you. This is really quite peculiar."

Peculiar, ruminated Richard's subconscious,—peculiar,—what was?—who?

But his conscious mind was listening attentively to the great T. B.

"—came in here," the great T. B. was saying, "and told me she had written, not only the story we hold but Terrill's book also. She has gone away again, to bring me identification and proofs."

"*What?*" You don't mean it! A woman?" exclaimed Coryat.

"Jane, Jane, Jane,—Jane had a lame tame crane," his subconscious mind murmured indistinctly, reviving a rhyme of his Aunt Clara's that he had forgotten for years. "Aunt Clara—Pie—Jane *had*—Jane *had*——"

"Coming in on Monday, eh?" Coryat's full consciousness heard itself remark. "I hope you'll let me meet her?"

("Jane *had*—Jane *had*—Jane had a lame tame crane.")

"I should like you to be here certainly, if you can arrange it?"

"What time?"

"Well—aah—er—as to that, Miss—aah—er—Cole didn't stipulate. But—er——"

"Well, let's see. Can you call me, Mr. Brush? It's Gramrecy 7230. I wish you would, when she comes. I expect to be in all day Monday, finishing that first article for you, and I can hurry right over. This really interests me extremely."

"Of course I am inclined utterly to disbelieve——" Mr. Brush negated. He spread his hands. "But still, you know, stranger things——"

"Exactly. It really would be quite surprising. Well, I won't keep you from your work. I just dropped in to see Breckinridge. He's away I understand?"

"He will be back on Tuesday."

"Well, don't let me detain you. You surely will call me, though, won't you? Quite remarkable, isn't it? But I suppose you editors have many such experiences. And after all, of course, this young lady may be an utter impostor. Still——. Well, good afternoon. By the way, I'll be in on Tuesday anyway, to deliver that first article."

He bowed and smiled to Miss Peabody as he passed her desk. Slade had introduced them originally.

"Is'n't it thur-rilling!" came the mock-awful voice of Miss Peabody.

"Quite," returned Coryat, halting. "Oh, quite. I intend to be in at the death on Monday though. Couldn't possibly forego it. You saw her, of course?"

"Yes, I talked to her. She really has considerable distinction. She *seems* somebody. I'm interested in her. What's more, I believe she wrote that story."

"Why?"

"Oh, I don't know. She looks it. She looks like a writer. And her eyes—my bottom dollar she's absolutely honest."

"Queer though—isn't it. Well, I must on. I repeat, I'll be in at the death."

"No, not that phrase, Mr. Coryat. I'm standing up for her."

"Oh, but good Lord, so am I for that matter. Only I can't believe she's really Richard Terrill. Well, till we meet again."

He nodded and smiled. Miss Peabody smiled, lifting her satiric eyebrow.

As he pressed the elevator button his subconscious mind became almost audible.

"Jane's crane was tame and lame, her crane was lame and tame; Jane *had*—Jane *had*——"

"What the devil," thought Coryat. "What the devil's that from? Who the devil? What the devil? What?"

He found no answer.

CHAPTER XVI: TRAGIC INTERLUDE

THE grey rain fell. The woman had been sitting by the window for half an hour. She withdrew her eyes from the falling rain and looked at her leather-strapped wrist watch. She raised her eyes to the rain again. She sat quietly, chin on hand, watching the rain.

What proofs had she thought she had? Anyway, what did *that* matter either? What did anything matter, now?

Dick *indeed!* Dick indeed! Oh, Dick! . . . Dick and Jane . . .

Life assumed its true outline. Hard, grey, dull. The softest thing in it was the whispering of the rain. Whispering, "Go to sleep! Go to sleep!"

It was impossible to imagine the energy that could even arise and put a teakettle on the burner. Even that. Impossible to imagine.

Dick *indeed!* After all this time. Dick indeed. After all this time. After all that. What sorry nonsense!

What a perfect faculty for remembrance and recognition *she* possessed, she thought bitterly.

But then, after all, he had changed so little. Had she changed so much?

The exhaustion that couldn't rise to put on the kettle could rise to stare in the mirror. Yes, she must have changed a great deal. Dick and Jane. Bah! Horrible ugly face. She ground her teeth at it. She clacked the hanging mirror to the wall. Ugly lath. She turned it round again.

Dick and Jane. . . . Good heavens, what a metronome! Damn it! It was infuriating.

She leaned against the mantle-shelf looking at the backs of Bergson and Freud and Lytton Strachey. She meditated the years. Well, why hadn't they changed *him* too? Why hadn't they changed *him*?

She never kept letters. Besides, there had been a holocaust of them years back. She had discovered the loss of that old contract two years ago. She had burdened herself with no papers. Prove that she was Richard Terrill? Only George Higgins was alive. She had not even kept that postal from George Higgins dated at Palermo, received last fall. And he had sent no forwarding address. Lord knows where he was now. There had never been a deader failure than that book, a greater disappointment. She could probably get in touch with a few people in England, by writing, after weeks, maybe months. But, what in heaven's name did it all matter *now*. . . .

It wasn't fair. It never had been fair. It never had been fair. She was weak. She was snivelling. She shook the angry tears out of her eyes.

She went back and ground her teeth and glared her worst at the mirror. The metronome had stopped. What was there to do.

She hated him, she loathed him, she detested him! *Ha!*—ha! ha!—think of letting *him* know. Just imagine it, will you? Just picture it! Ha. Ha-ha. Dick and . . . !

Yes, of course, that was what all these last weeks had been saying. It was a failure. Writing. Life. Talent? Yes, she had had it. Heartbreak didn't break you. You learned to write in it. Write well. It never broke you. It never would break you. You would break yourself in two, sometime, with your bare hands—like that—*snap!* But it would never be heartbreak that broke you. No. O, indeed not! *Heartbreak!* She sniffed contemptuously, her lower lip bitten by her upper teeth. She straightened her shoulders and turned away from the mantle, stood with drawn cheeks and intolerably bright eyes, staring, wire-drawn, scornful.

Her right arm lay along the mantle as she faced the window. Her head was high.

Her head lay on her right arm, in the crook of her left arm, too. Her fingers twisted and twisted and twisted together. Her face was hidden.

CHAPTER XVII: MR. DUFFITT IS QUITE MISTAKEN

MR. JASON DUFFITT, brooding over Miss Sophia Crome's conjectures, encountered disaster. Mrs. Ventress had expressed acquiescence, at length, in reply to his urgent request to show her some of the possible building sites beyond the Axter Road. He had brushed aside with a fat hand her assurances that she had no intention of buying or building. "Do no harm," he remarked. "Like to show you." One morning he turned up about ten o'clock. The day was still fairly cool. After an exchange of politenesses they started forth together.

As Mr. Gartner had remarked, there was something obscurely unlikable about Jason Duffit. He had a secretive nervous side. No one had ever known much about his private life, except that he seemed a plethoric rather mum-chance bachelor, employing a grey-haired negro woman from the Bottom to cook his meals. His business in Coal and Wood had always been conducted in an affable manner enough. He seemed strictly honest. He had handled matters of real estate in an acceptable manner. He was acquainted with everybody in a breezy, offhand fashion, and friends with none. That he seemed susceptible to feminine beauty had been remarked, but no breath of scandal had touched him. He went to church regularly of a Sunday, and his attitude in conducting business dealings was sufficiently dignified. He was "good ole Jase" to many. His political opinions were comfortably conservative.

Romance, however, is an odd mistress. Jason had no mind, knew hardly anything about books. Nevertheless he had once subscribed for a set of Court Memoirs that an

itinerant book-agent offered him with certain remarks made in a lowered voice. He had added to these, several bulky volumes bound in bright red which he had purchased in a second-hand store in Barrack Falls. These purchases he had always kept dark. The books stood under glass and behind curtains in a small locked book-case in his bedroom. Of a summer evening he was accustomed to unlock that book-case, to sit by a very hot lamp at the rear window of his bedroom, with his stockinged feet upon the sill, and peruse the pages with a constantly wetted thumb and an odd gloating. He read slowly, almost painfully, assimilating not at all the historical or literary values of the volumes. Fascinating court favourites and redolent amours were the things that feasted his eyes.

There was, indeed, something Heliogabalan about the secret imagination of Jason Duffitt. It was reflected in that odd look in his eyes. Outwardly he was quite shamefacedly moral, uprightly conservative; inwardly, how he would have enjoyed the license of old Rome in her decline! It would seem a pity that Jason had been born so far out of his proper period.

Sophia Crome, with spinsterish if perfectly maidenly insinuation about people of the town, fed his fancy. He had always like Sophia for that reason. And then he never regarded Sophia as a woman. Hers was rather the tongue of an extremely weak and diluted Aretino. She could, for instance, never have blasted a reputation—she would, of course, never have indulged in “language”—she merely never ceased insinuating.

Her conjectures about the lady up at the Battell place had, unfortunately, fed Jason’s fancy too spicily. The side of his mind affected by her gossip germinated a barbaric illusion. Which was really too bad.

He and Mrs. Ventress took their way across a field under the Hill on the upper slope of which the white portico of the Institute gleamed in the morning sunshine.

“Yeah,” Duffitt was saying. “Good bit o’ property that.

Bill Farrell'll hang on to it too. Not thinkin' of buyin' here, you say, Mrs. Ventress?"

"Why no,—as I told you," returned Adela.

"Do worse," said Duffitt. "Goin' t'be garden spot, some day. Garden spot."

"You know I'm just here for the summer," said Adela. "Though I like it here."

"Do worse," repeated Duffitt. "Do worse."

The churring of the crickets was loud all around them as they crossed the unploughed part of the field.

Suddenly the stout Duffitt stopped and began mopping his brow. He shot a sidewise glance at the lady under the sunshade. She was, as he expressed it to himself, "easy to look at."

"Old style," he assured himself, thinking aloud.

"What? I didn't hear."

"Thinkin'. So many women runnin' crazy these days. Tearin' round, yellin', votin'. Like the old style, m'self. You—you look it."

"Thank you. But that's amusing too."

"Why? You know you're that kind."

"You don't believe then in woman suffrage?"

"Humph. Say not. Jew?"

It was not a question of race.

"Why certainly you don't believe there are more idiotic women than there are men?"

"Huh?"

Mr. Duffitt seemed surprised.

"There are equally as many women who can use the ballot with intelligence. And then we have quite as much natural solidarity—with a little education."

"Well," said Mr. Duffitt sombrely. "Well," He seemed unable to get on. They were walking again and had come to a tree at the other end of the meadow. There was a humped spreading root of it that made a convenient seat. As Duffitt halted once more, Mrs. Ventress sat down on the root.

"Well," summoned Jason. "Well now I'm s'prised hear you say that. But that ain't it after all, y'know. Runnin' roun, shoutin'——"

"But after all," returned Adela, "it's hardly an issue any longer. Of course," she added, "Socialism still is."

"What?" Mr. Duffitt was really shocked. "You're not a socialist, Mrs. Ventress? I'll say not. I'll certainly say not."

"There are so many kinds. I'm—my kind."

"An'—an' free love—an', an' all that?"

Adela's smile was deeply amused. Inadvertently she raised her eyebrows even more. It gave her a piquant appearance.

"Sex," said Adela, "is another perplexing question. Bernard Shaw——"

"Well," said Duffitt, mopping his face again. "Well," said Jason, turning toward the sun and pulling his hat-brim over his eyes.

As he stood so, his cigar raked upward at an angle from his puffy mouth. He regarded a distant church spire with the minutest attention. Adela had an impish prompting to tell him to stand on his head and regard it from that point of view. However, she didn't.

"Huh," said Mr. Duffitt, removing his cigar and transferring his gaze to it with an evident wonder at its inanimate existence, a childlike stupidity. "Well now——" He reinserted the cigar. He began clipping the grass with his stick.

"Don't you think so?" Adela couldn't help saying quite gravely.

"Well now, y'know," said the utterly unskilled Jason, removing his hat and looking inside it as if he expected to find an Easter egg, "well y'know, speakin' as a man of the world, o'course I know—o'course I know——"

He puffed his mouth even more, endeavouring to assume a judicial demeanour.

"O'course, Mrs. Ventress," he remarked suddenly, "There's them as does and them as don't."

"Don't believe in Bernard Shaw? But I don't believe Shaw believes in free love. And then it all depends so much upon the definition of course."

She had really forgotten him. She was really thinking, trying to think honestly. There was something pathetic about him and he was puzzled. Puzzled by large abstractions.

"Well I—" Mr. Duffitt suddenly began to walk to and fro. He looked at her swiftly askance several times. He was visibly out of his element, but he was inordinately attracted by her as he looked at her.

Finally he made a sort of swimming gesture with his hands. Perhaps this restored him to his element, because he began to speak again.

"Breaks up families," quoth he, and puffed heavily upon his cigar, regarding it ever and anon as if surprised that it remained with him.

"Yet—" said Mrs. Ventress, trying to think it out, and paused. Her chin was cupped in one hand, one elbow on her knee. She gazed over the field. She made a charming picture in her gardening hat.

Mr. Duffitt had never seen such a woman. He was perturbed but strangely and deeply thrilled by her. He hung on to his cigar. He walked up and down.

"Free love," Mr. Duffitt affirmed, "is a sin."

"As I said," returned Adela, "or as I meant to say, so much depends upon your definition. When you think of present conditions in marriage, things could hardly be worse. You'll grant that?"

She looked at him, quite seriously.

"Know what you mean," said Jason, meaning he thought he did. "Your idea is——?"

"I don't know," said Adela simply, spreading her hands.

"You——?" said Mr. Duffitt, stopping and looking at her, rather flushed.

Mrs. Ventress was slowly aware that there was something not quite agreeable in his tone. She was tired of the subject anyway, and perhaps she should not have entered upon it with this comic creature. But such subjects always drew her into argument.

She got up. "Well, shall we turn back?" she said.

Jason stood watching her. His colour was high. A strange expression had come about his mouth and eyes. All that Miss Crome had implied so subtly seemed flagrantly manifest. He said quite clearly "Hey?"

Adela looked at him astonished. But also he *did* look amusing.

"What is it?" she asked. As he raised his eyes to her hair, "My hat?" Her hands went up to her hat while her sunshade trailed.

Suddenly she realised that Mr. Duffitt had made a movement to embrace her.

"Here! What?" said Mrs. Ventress, stepping back.

"Aw now!" said Mr. Duffitt with a rather hoarse chuckle.

She was extremely astonished. She could not help thinking, as she stepped behind the tree, that this was colossally, flagrantly absurd. But certainly scary.

She made a mistake in stepping behind the tree. Mr. Duffitt stepped behind the tree. He also had mistaken. Suddenly Adela became very cold and angry. Her muscles tightened to steel wire and she jabbed Mr. Duffitt accurately in the neck with the ferule of her sunshade. It was a short-arm thrust, it hurt his neck. He thought it must have gone through it.

And she was suddenly very sorry. But she remained in the same posture, erect, furious. Mr. Duffitt regarded his fingers several times, astonished at not seeing them covered with blood, evidently. He backed off.

He did not say anything. He eyed her with astonishment. The longer he eyed her the rounder his eyes became. He halted and regarded her. His eyes fell before hers. There was something that prevented his approaching her

again. Something that prevented him from speaking to her again.

Suddenly he turned and began to walk with odd hitchiness, as though he were not quite sober, across the ploughed part of the field, stumbling among the clods. He made a wavering course toward the far-off Axter Road. He diminished in the distance.

Mrs. Ventress came slowly from behind the tree. She stood watching him. She raised her sunshade. She was still astonished and shivering from the reaction from anger. But her fear had been only momentary. She was actually sorry for that diminishing lurching figure. He became, with the distance, more and more grotesque.

"We-el——" said Mrs. Ventress to herself, in the absolutely-giving-it-up manner.

"We-el," said Mrs. Ventress. "Well, *really!*"

She began to pick her way across the grass, biting her lip and raising her eyebrows at the sun-speckled leaves.

By the time she regained the Axter Road there remained only a faint, incredulous disgust. An ordinary, apparently mentally responsible person had suddenly turned into a particularly unpleasant kind of lunatic. The metamorphosis had been scary—but not so much scary as——. Adela wrinkled her small nose, shrugged nervously. How could you possibly be angry, however, with a man so much like a mountebank? Besides she was really sorry if she had hurt his neck. The whole episode was entirely unreal. As she clicked her front gate, she decided just to forget it. It was both undignified and utterly absurd.

As she went upstairs she remembered Mr. Duffitt looking into his hat as if to find an Easter egg. At that she suddenly stopped and laughed. The still house echoed her.

As for Jason, he hurried down the Farm Road. He was beginning to realise just what a mammoth ass he had made of himself. To his disordered mind she had been both taunting and tempting him. The groove worn smooth in his brain by much secret lascivious thinking had seemed to

broaden and tilt like the bed of a torrent under a quickening current of delirious surmise. Now the colour of actual grass, the colour of actual dust ached upon his sight. The reality of the whitewashed fence he was passing, of the Cripps' red barn showing distantly southward, panged his senses. His ordinary caution and shrewdness ranted in his brain like demons, "You fool!"

And about his heart, faint as a thin trickle of icy water, ran a little cold fear. What impulse could possibly have led him to affront a lady of evident position and importance in New York, to whom he had rented the Battells' house? Suppose this came out? What of the Battells? What would the town say? How could he explain? What had possessed him?

He became aware of the necessity of presenting an unruffled front to Market Street. At the lower end of the Farm Road he stopped his heavy padding, straightened his tie, mopped his forehead, flicked his shoes with his bandanna handkerchief. He adopted as nonchalant a manner as possible crossing the street. The rest of the day he sat closely confined to his office, suffering the tortures of damned spirits. When he saw Mrs. Ventress in the distance, on the station platform, a few days later, it disturbed him considerably. When, still later, he learned that she was presumably going to Philadelphia for a couple of days, he began fearfully to speculate. He passed through a period of being extremely scared. Out of fear comes hate. Hate is anything but reasonable.

CHAPTER XVIII: BESSIE ENLIVENS BREAK-FAST

ON Saturday morning, the twenty-first of July, Slade sat at breakfast with Dr. Gedney in the house on Poplar Street. Bessie was not yet down. Annie set scrambled eggs on toast before them and disposed their cups of coffee.

"Anything exciting been happening?" asked Slade.

"Arthur's worried about the store, but then he's always worried about the store. After all, the store is one of our institutions and likely to remain so. Then too he had a black Sumatra die the other day."

"Too bad. And your history?"

"Progressing. Still in the period of the Civil War."

"What's Bess been doing?"

"Reading. Going around. Still taking drawing with Mrs. Ventress. Determined to try her hand in New York once she gets her last year finished at the Institute. Well, I suppose that's the thing for her to do. Pretty quiet here for a young girl. I get fearful of her leaving. Still, it's always been my belief that—for good or bad—they must try their own wings. Bessie's sensible. And she'd have you there, of course, to turn to."

"Surely would. I think you're broad-minded about it, Uncle Charles. Most fathers——"

"Oh, well,—remember Gertrude. After all, you can't keep them."

They both fell silent. Slade remembered Gertrude. His own mother had never forgiven Gertrude. He himself did not quite understand it. His father thought that Gertrude must have died. How and why she should so utterly have disappeared? His father said it was her mother. His

mother defended her mother. Uncle Charles never mentioned his wife.

It must have been a terrific thing for them at the time—the Gedneys. To Slade it was largely hearsay at long distance, a story in which for a long time he had had no concern. He had been a five-year-old when it happened. His first real appreciation of it was some ten years later. Her brother Charles was very dear to his mother. He found her crying over a letter of his one morning when Slade came home early from school. The story came out gradually as a secret—a narration of old unhappy far-off things. Now Uncle Charles could speak of Gertrude quite calmly, without a quiver in his voice, though with a distinct hint of sadness. The stream of days and hours had flowed on steadily over the sunken and dulled brightness of those earlier years. Their silver was drifted over with sand, though the immutable memory persisted under the settling silt of grief and run and ripple of time, brighter and clearer in its occasional resurrection than ever the reality had been, perhaps.

Slade had never known his Aunt Martha at all. Though his mother loved her brother, strangely enough she had never said a word against his wife. Slade's father really understood Dr. Gedney far better, although he felt no particular warmth toward him. Slade had heard him say frankly a number of times that he had "never liked that woman". Slade's mother retorted that nevertheless "Charles was always so wrapped up in Gertrude. How *could* she leave him that way?"

Then there were the usual speculations concerning what could ever have happened to her. If not dead surely she would have come back.

"Well, my dear, I don't pretend to understand it myself." Mr. Breckinridge would say. "But I must say I can't blame her for wanting to get away from that woman——"

"What did you know of Martha? You only saw her twice in your life."

"I know the type."

"She was always very nice to us. She was devoted to him."

"You mean she never let go of him. That's true enough."

"I don't know what you mean. Charles has always been perfectly contented in Tupton. She made his life hers."

"Too much so, I should say. She had no life of her own. She was viciously jealous of Gertrude."

"Why, George, how can you say such a thing? You have absolutely nothing to go on."

"I know, that's all. I know Charles. You don't."

"Not know my own dear brother! Why I love him better than anyone in the world!"

"Thanks," said Mr. Breckinridge dryly. "Yes, I know you love him; but you don't understand him."

The argument was unacrimonious but endless.

It always broke off with his mother's final comprehensive indictment of Gertrude's action, during which his father would sit silently smoking. Was it because of his ingrained perversity that his father always took the side of the children against the parents when his mother took the side of the parents against the children? Slade had known his father take exactly the opposite position in arguments with himself. But was it all perversity? No.

Once his father had said to him quietly, "There's a certain type of woman I'd run a thousand miles from; so why blame Gertrude?" And once, to his mother, "It's my belief, you know, that Charles heard from her."

"Why, George, you never said that before. When, possibly? And surely he would have told us. There is nothing hidden about Charles."

"Why should he have told us. I don't mean that he heard immediately. But, after a while—after Martha's death, I believe he did. And why should he have told us—anyone. There's something hidden about every man—the things that go deepest. Why should he have told?"

"Well I *never* thought of that possibility at all. I shall certainly find occasion——"

"My dear Sally, he wouldn't tell you. You would only hurt him needlessly by a question. It's all over long ago now. Let it rest. You love him, so let it rest."

"Then why wouldn't the ungrateful girl have come back to him, knowing how he loved her?"

"Pride perhaps. Complications. Who can tell? There's a great deal of pride on both sides of that family. You ought to know your brother's pride. And there's more to any situation than meets the eye. Gertrude might have thought——"

"Well, I simply *don't* understand it!"

"Yes, it's hard to understand—life," Slade had heard his father say, musing. "Very hard sometimes."

After getting to know his Uncle Charles Slade often thought his father might have divined the truth. He could not understand what went on under Uncle Charles' quiet exterior. Now as he glanced at him across the breakfast table, he thought what a mystery every single human being is to every other, in spite of the deep fundamental likenesses. A singular, silent man, his Uncle Charles. A wasted life in many peoples' opinion. An eccentric character. Probably far more deeply emotional than he ever permitted to be shown. A mind that seemed to enjoy losing itself in the record of other times, without any strong desire for acquaintance with his own. A dreamer, a solitary; yet with no urgency upon him of a message to deliver. Taciturn without moroseness, seeking always through books and never finding. Contemplating. A man of few words and scarcely any friends. A man with a peculiar innocence of outlook. contented with simple things. A sensitive, half-paralysed being stunned by certain early blows, after which the soul had never regained full consciousness. All in the mind. Mysteriously secret. The riddle of temperament. Vaguely, in such fashion, Slade saw his uncle as the latter masticated and sipped coffee, sitting with that scholar's droop of shoulders.

"Hello, Slade!" said Bessie brightly, coming quietly into

the small dining-room and around the table toward him. His chair gave a squeak on the rug as he half-rose. "No, sit down. Good-morning!" Her cool lips just brushed his forehead. She looked pretty, dainty and cool in her apple-green frock. She seated herself at the side of the table between the two men.

She was graver, though, more sedate, somehow older. The expression on her face was as brightly youthful as ever, but some quality Slade did not understand had crept into her voice. He recognised a difference. It made his expression absent-minded as he looked at her.

"Sorry Adela's been away in Philadelphia for a few days," Bessie vouchsafed after a minute of banter. Slade felt somewhat clumsy in answering, through his disappointment, "That so? How's she been?"

"Oh, as lovely as usual; and I *must* show you the drawing I made of her. She thinks it's very good. It really isn't bad at all, if I do say it. But she went on this trip. However, we'll see if she's back by to-morrow. She intended to get back late to-night."

"That so? Love to see your drawing. I'm sure it's good."

"But there are some of the *meanest* people in this town," pronounced Bessie decidedly. "I think Miss Brattle and those two old Babbitt spinsters are the most horrid gossips I ever met with. And as for Miss Crome! They've spread around a sort of general feeling against Adela. It's been growing—and it's all their fault. I'd like to choke them. I've run up against it several times. There's nothing definite said so it's hard to know what to do. But she's beginning to feel it too; that's the awful part of it. It's perfectly *horrid*."

"Really?" said Slade. "That's rotten."

"It's all so ridiculous too," cried Bessie. "When you think of her fine mind and the quiet, lovely way she lives. Of *course* we don't know much about her. I know *I* don't, and I'm certainly her most intimate friend here. But I

know she has an adorable mind and a very generous disposition, and never could possibly have done *anyone* any harm. Of *course* I know nothing of her past life—nor do I *care*—nor do I care one *snap!*” announced Bessie, waving a piece of toast. “‘Od rot ‘em!”

Dr. Gedney looked up in mild surprise. “*Well, Bess!*” he cautioned in amusement.

“I *mean* it,” said Bessie. “I never knew before that some of the people in this town could be so picayune. It isn’t the way *I’ve* been brought up anyway. Small-minded, suspicious gossipers, always chattering behind each other’s backs. . . . And I *hate* that Mr. Duffitt. I overheard him say something sneering about Adela the other morning when I was down at the market. I was passing him to buy some vegetables. He was talking to Mr. Whinnymuir. I just turned around and went right up to him and said, “Mr. Duffitt, that’s a lie; and to say the least it is in the worst possible taste for you to speak that way of a rentee of yours. I am perfectly surprised at you!”

“Why, *Bess!*” But the smile twitched about the corners of her father’s mouth. “Rentee” was good. Decidedly. “But it really seems to me most remarkable of Mr. Duffitt. What did he say?”

“Oh, he said *then* that I had completely misunderstood him, and turned several colours and explained and explained. But I know I *didn’t* misunderstand him—though there’s no use going over it.” Bessie bit into a piece of toast almost viciously. “I can trust my own ears. Yes, it *does* make me furious, as nothing else does. I *never* liked that Mr. Duffitt anyway. He’s too fat.”

“But your Uncle Arthur is—ah—well, portly?” said her father soothingly.

“But that isn’t at all the same thing. Uncle Arthur is an innocent. Mr. Duffitt is meandering and sly. I don’t like him. Of course I wouldn’t tell Adela what I heard him say, but I asked her if she liked him.”

“Does she?”

"She simply said, 'Why should I like him or dislike him? I suppose he's a good enough real-estate agent.'"

"Well he certainly isn't, and he can't—to say the least—have any brains," said Slade, "if he goes around talking like that. He must be a fool."

He liked the fervour with which Bessie had taken up the cudgels for her friend. But then, of course, he very much liked the friend. The morning seemed sunnier and cooler in the thought of her.

"All small towns are small-minded," he said. "You and Uncle Charles are exceptions here. You——"

"Oh, no, Slade, it isn't as bad as all that," interrupted his uncle. "It isn't as bad as all that. It's simply that many people here have nothing else to do except talk—particularly the women."

"I don't know about that last, adorable individual," Bessie usually took this half-teasing attitude toward her father. "I'm for my own sex. And remember that though Uncle Arthur is a particular lamb of mine,—why, he tried to say the most absurd things to me about Adela. I wouldn't have it. I simply had to speak to him."

Slade grinned at this and then laughed. Dr. Gedney smiled his thorough amusement. Bessie smiled secretly at her own feminine thoughts.

Bessie was the boss, thought Slade.

CHAPTER XIX: ADELA LOOKS EIGHTEEN

SLADE and Bessie took a long walk on Saturday. That evening Uncle Arthur came to dinner. On Sunday morning Bessie decided to forego church in order to take Slade over to Mrs. Ventress's. They could see, anyway, whether she had returned from Philadelphia.

"Adela never goes to church," said his cousin as they left the house. "She doesn't believe in churches. She says there was once something very unhappy in her life over which she prayed a great deal, and nothing happened. I can see why she doesn't want to go. Sometimes I don't exactly know why *I* go, myself. I wonder. Don't you, Slade? I don't really believe in it all at all."

It was the first time he and his cousin had ever got upon the topic of religion.

"I don't," returned Slade honestly. "I never go in the city. I used to really love the Christian religion. I still admire it, in a way. I don't care for the squabbling denominations. I'd rather be a Catholic if I were anything. It's certainly the most logical. But I'm really an agnostic. Father is. It seems the most honest to me. No, I don't care about churches much. If the Christian religion has done a great deal of good it's also done a great deal of harm. It kills the natural kindness and honesty in so many people. And people use it as a club and a bogie-man to get their own way. I don't think much of Christian morality, so-called."

Bessie thought that over.

"That's about the way I feel," she said finally. "Only I guess I like the service better than you do."

"I like to roar hymns," said Slade. "Only I notice the most devout people don't either have a very pleasant time

themselves or want anyone else to have one. When you see a person whose religion does them some real good and helps them to help other people, well I suppose that's all right. But if you believe there's only one way of spiritual salvation for the soul you ought to be able to see the point of view of a Torquemada. I can see his point of view myself. Only I don't agree with it. Oh, well, don't let me fill you up with my heresies, Bess. But they're all so afraid of something, afraid that if they don't do a thing some one particular way something will happen to them. And that's so cowardly. Well, nevertheless, I admire the bravery of Christ. He turned his back on his enemies and wrote in the sand."

Pastors had called on Dr. Gedney. He had been absent-minded and vague and had never entered their churches. Religious people regarded him simply as a harmless old idiot and ceased to be concerned about his soul. Bessie was a puzzle to them also, but she usually came to church. They said among themselves that she was a nice good child and that it was a Shame.

* * *

A cool Sunday morning for late July. A sky of light and tremulous blue. A garden vivid with patches and blots of colour, pale blue, deep blue, velvet purple, shattering crimson, dull gold, licking tongues of scarlet.

A lady in the garden. A lady alone. In a wide grey hat, in a frock of figured blue-grey with an organdie collar, her pretty feet and ankles trimly shod with grey. She moved about her garden singing an old song, singing it softly.

"—And the bonny Earl o' Murray
O he might ha' been a king!"

Daintily, dexterously she clipped flowers into her plaited basket.

She was back in the garden under the apple-tree, a graceful sun-misted figure in its shade. Her singing floated and drifted faintly on the still morning air.

She bent over, straightened, turned, came picking her way daintily toward the front of the house.

“Lang, lang may his lady
Look o’er the castle down
Ere she see the Earl o’ Murray
Come sounding through the toun!”

— “Good morning!”

She looked up, a little startled. Then she smiled. In Mrs. Ventress’s smile the ordinarily grave expression of her face broke into one both merry and childlike. Smiling, she suddenly seemed so much younger. It was in the way the corners of her mouth went up and in the clear and innocent amusement of her eyes. Though not much over the average height, her slimness and her springlike dress gave her somewhat the appearance of a tall young girl.

“Hello!” she said frankly to Slade.

“I came past with Bessie. You didn’t see us. She has to run over to Uncle Arthur’s a minute, but she’ll be right back. How are you? It’s awfully nice to see you again.”

He extended his hand.

“It’s nice to see *you*. How have *you* been?”

“Oh, very well, indeed. It’s been hot, of course, in New York. Still I’ve managed to worry through. You look nice and cool this morning.”

“Yes, it’s a lovely morning, isn’t it? Do you like flowers?”

She extended the basket.

“My, they’re beautiful,” said Slade, leaning over. “What was that you were singing just now?” he asked, interested.

“Oh,” Mrs. Ventress laughed apologetically. “But I can’t sing. I was *trying* to sing that old ballad, ‘The Earl o’ Murray’.”

“Sing some more,” requested Slade forthrightly, and then, at his abruptness, they both laughed a little together.

“But do,” said Slade. “Won’t you?”

“Well, I’ll try,” returned Mrs. Ventress. She was look-

ing at him as honestly as a child. She raised her bright face and

“Ye highlands and ye lawlands,
O’ where hae ye been;
They ha slain the Earl o’ Murr-rray,
And laid him on the green——”

Slightly swinging the plaited basket, she sang it all through, without the slightest self-consciousness, a being rejoicing in clear sunlight. Her voice had a childlike reediness, but she held the air perfectly. Slade stood silent watching her. Her eyes closed as she sang.

They were open and full of laughing light.

“But how nice of you to listen! Did you like it?” she asked.

“*Did I!*” said Slade, and was dumb.

“They’re lovely, those old things, don’t you think so?” she asked.

“That was,” murmured Slade, looking dazedly away, as if he had seen a ghost. “How talented you are!”

“*I—oh, no, indeed!*” returned Adela. “You know I can’t sing. I can’t sing for sour apples. But, good Lord, how I do love it!”

They both laughed again.

Bessie came in at the gate. She hesitated for an instant, came across the grass to them.

“O Adela, I want to show Slade that drawing I made of you. You know I left it here. Can I get it?”

“You most certainly can. Wait, I’ll find it for you.”

They went up the steps and into the house together, in that sudden intimate conversation so ready between women.

Slade sat down on the lowest step of the porch and began to fill his pipe from a circular red-rubber pouch. After it was lit he drew upon it lazily. He gazed out over the hedge at the green sunny fields opposite, at the rise of the Hill and the white gleam of the Institute afar.

What a remarkable being! She looked about eighteen, standing there—singing.

He relit his pipe as steps scuffed behind him on the porch. "Here it is. Now Slade, *don't* you think it's good?"

As Bessie bent over him her soft hair brushed his face, her soft young cheek touched his. He examined the drawing intently. It was excellent.

In it Mrs. Ventress was reclining in that long Chinese wicker chair up on the porch. She was leaning on one elbow, her face half-turned toward you. The grave contemplative expression upon the face was perfect.

"*Darn* good," said Slade finally. "Only I've seen you look merrier——"

He twisted round to his left to look at Adela. Bessie repossessed herself of the drawing. Adela merely smiled and went over to look at the drawing over Bessie's shoulder. Her hand fell naturally upon that shoulder and stayed there. Bessie was looking at the drawing with knitted brows. She tilted it once. Now she looked up at Adela suddenly, with dark eyes. "Shall I tear it up?" she asked.

"Tear it up? Most certainly not," said Mrs. Ventress. "Why on earth——?"

"It isn't very nice," Bessie replied, tossing it suddenly upon a chair. "But *you* are," she said, gripping her friend's arms. "You are—you are, you are!"

As swiftly she loosed them and looked at Slade. He felt that it was a cold little look, cold and dark. He wondered why.

"It's darn good, Bess," he repeated. "Darn good. Really."

"Oh, I can do better," remarked his cousin, her expression bright again. "I will some day. Well, what shall we do? Just sit and talk?"

"Well, I have a good story," said Slade. "It's called 'The Mysterious Manuscript'."

"Oh, let's hear it," returned Adela seating herself on the foot of the long wicker chair and drawing Bessie down beside her. Slade got up and sat down again nearer them, his back against a porch pillar. He began to tell them the story of

"The Crystal Castle". He arrived at the point of Coryat's revelations.

"This man," Slade went on, "is a friend of a friend of mine in town. He's been doing some articles for *The New Age*. An interesting chap. His name's Coryat. Well, he——"

"What—Richard Coryat?" Mrs. Ventress asked suddenly.

"Why,—yes? Do you know him?"

"I—I have some friends who do."

The slip had been clumsy. She bit her lip.

Slade was surprised, puzzled. However, he recovered and went on smoothly.

"Richard Coryat. Well, he said it was undoubtedly the work of a man named Richard Terrill——"

Again Adela could not disguise a start. But, "Go on!" she begged as Slade seemed about to stop.

No. He couldn't understand it. There was something peculiar. He kept his eyes on hers. Hers turned aside to seek Bessie's. Bessie was looking at her too, but only in a vague way.

"Well, he said a man named Terrill who had written one remarkable book, 'Golden Windfall', must certainly be the author of this story. Anyway, I had him in afterward to see old T. B. He convinced old T. B.

"That's what they call the editor of *The Colosseum*." Bessie supplied.

"Unfortunately though, though he had had a copy of the book——" Slade paused.

"Yes, go on," said Adela, smiling naturally. "I'm interested."

"Well, he had lent a copy to a friend. The friend had gone out of town. I don't know who it was. Anyway, it's been impossible as yet to get hold of a copy; and the author of the manuscript hasn't shown up. But I do believe you've read the book, or know Terrill, or something, Mrs. Ventress. You look so queerly."

"I? *Did I?*" she half-laughed. "Well, I'll confess that

I *have* read the book. It's rare, but wonderful. It's all this Mr.—what was it? Coryat?—has said about it."

"You've *read* it?" asked Bessie in joy. "*Really?*"

"Really. That's why I started, if I did start. Of course I've heard of Mr.—Coryat as one of the admirers of the book—through acquaintances, mutual acquaintances. I know nothing of the author, Richard Terrill. But I don't see how this manuscript you speak of, Mr. Breckinridge, could possibly be by the same person. I thought he was supposed to be an Englishman, and that he is supposed to have died some years ago?"

"So Coryat said. But he's not sure now. He's not at all sure. He says there are tricks of style and a general atmosphere that only Terrill could give it. Odd, isn't it?"

"And the writer of the manuscript hasn't come in at all?" put in Bessie.

"Hadn't, up to the time I left. We have the manuscript in the safe. All we can do is wait."

Mrs. Ventress was silent.

"But look here, you haven't your copy here have you?" asked Slade suddenly.

"I? Oh, why no. No, I'm sorry, I haven't it."

"Well, that's too bad," said Slade. "I would have borrowed it, with your permission, to show to old T. B."

"I think it's the most remarkable *thing*," said Bessie. She was looking at her friend with wondering eyes. She slipped a hand in Mrs. Ventress's hand.

Adela began to say, "It is—most remarkable. I certainly hope you find out the truth, but of course I believe myself that Richard Terrill is dead."

"In that case," returned Slade, "it might be somebody copying his work."

"Oh, no, I really don't think anyone could copy him," said Adela hastily. She wanted to evince interest, but she wanted to get off the subject of Terrill. It was thin ice.

What nice children they were, though, she thought, watching them pass out of her gate. They both waved. Slade had

not worn a hat and the sunlight struck a gleam from his hair like that on old furbished brass. His ruddy, sunburned complexion and well-cut features were refreshing and clean. He walked with the elasticity of youth. His grey clothes, white soft-collared shirt and grey and yellow tie became him. His dark-haired cousin in her apple-green frock, with her vivid colour and quick graceful gestures was a charming contrast. Slade bent his head toward Bessie, to say something, and they both laughed. What nice white teeth they both had! Adela smiled at herself. Was she growing into a sentimental match-maker?

No. They were just nice children, both rather gloriously immature. Bessie was, of course, in love with Slade. Slade had his stupid side. All men had their stupid side. As for her—oh, well! She had known one man at least——. One—and so many others. It was pleasant to recline here in the sunlight and the leaf-shadows, doing nothing. Marie and the cook were inside seeing to small necessities. As for her——what had she accomplished down here so far? She had rested. She had written a little. She flushed faintly when she thought of it. She had intended to read a good deal and expand her philosophy. As a matter of fact, she had lazed. She must have been more tired than she thought. Much more tired. Tired of the hectic artificiality of the city, tired of the urgency to essentially unimportant industry, tired of “L” and surface-car and Subway and the interfluctuant masses of people surging in from nowhere and hurrying nowhither. Tired of the eternal racket of the streets and the unintermittent impact of ocular and auditory impressions upon the quivering nerves. Here, there was silence and the white road outside her hedge—a church-bell mellowed by distance. Only a soothing if continuous insect sound throbbing in the stillness like the sifting shifting of fine sand shaken rapidly back and forth in a tube of thin glass. The sunlight drowsed her. An occasional “pr-reep, pr-reep” from some bird in the vines. The faint sound of tinware in the kitchen. She relaxed and dreamed.

Perhaps she had merely been overtired. No, she knew it was deeper than that. O, if *only* he had lived! As she thought of him she recalled the other life too, her marriage. Good heavens, she actually had not thought of *him* for years! It hadn't been *his* fault really, she supposed. But how impossible their marriage had become. Good heavens!

He had certainly come on quite well as an illustrator since then. She now remembered that she *had* seen a page-advertisement he had drawn, recognising his technique on the back-cover of a large popular magazine over a year ago. He was doubtless perfectly well-off, if he got commissions like that. Well, it had been as much her fault as his—call it that. She smiled at her magnanimity. He was probably with that big syndicate in Chicago. He had most probably found someone else. Good lord, how long ago that all seemed! What a wild, frightened, bewildered, but determined girl had turned up that blowing Fall evening at Ethel Aspern's on Park Avenue. How she had clung to Ethel for weeks. How wonderfully good and kind Ethel had been. How nearly crazed she must have been, she herself, now that she looked back upon it. No, it couldn't have gone on. He was even more ill-adjusted to life than she had been then, and far more uncontrolled. Then, later, had come the idyl. But idyls didn't last. And there was no substitute for *his* love—never could be. She knew. That had been the one perfect thing—sealed away. If he had lived——.

But that, anyway, was not what she was seeking. What she was seeking was something in which she knew that, after all, she had come nearer to him than for a long while; yes, even though she couldn't talk to him about it. And she *would* put it through. She *would*—for him. It was that. She had suddenly realised it. It was for him, after all. It was for him that she was here—that she had turned sharp on her life and determined——.

CHAPTER XX: SIRENA UNDER SUSPICION

BESSIE had an engagement for a walk with one of her few girl friends that Sunday afternoon.

"Why don't you go over and see Adela?" she herself suggested, when Doctor Gedney had retired to his study after the mid-day dinner. Bessie had set herself a quixotic task. Why she had done so she had not the slightest idea. But in it she experienced a Scaevolan enjoyment. It seemed a present need of her nature.

Slade felt awkward. "Maybe I will. I guess I'll take a walk over toward the Institute anyway. Which way are you girls going?"

"Oh, Jean wants me to go over with her to the Wilder farm. The Wilder girl's sick and she's taking some things over. I have to meet her at the corner up here. I'm sorry to desert you this way, Slade; but wander over and see Adela. She's nice. You'll have a good time."

With a bright smile but an enigmatic glance, she was gone. Well, he thought, why not?

Mrs. Ventress was not on her porch. He rang the bell.

Marie smiled and nodded at him and indicated the north-east parlour. A moment later he saw Adela in the hall. She caught sight of him.

"Gracious, what did Marie put you in there for! You look so very polite sitting up in that straight chair. Come across the hall! Where's Bessie?"

"She's gone over to the Wilders' with a friend. She suggested that I come over. I hope you weren't lying down. I haven't disturbed you, have I?"

The southwest parlour was certainly much more attractive. The blue curtains, the grey-blue-figured rug, the few

pictures, the flowers in the big bowl on the table, all charming.

"Oh, no, indeed! I never lie down during the day. I know it's the custom here Sunday afternoons, but I never keep customs. Take *that* chair. It's much the most comfortable."

"Thank you," said Slade. "I——" he began. For a moment he could think of nothing to say.

She still wore the grey-blue dress. Her brown hair with the sunlight in it, her piquant face, her intelligent eyes, her slim graceful figure in the old high-backed chair, her pale hand fingering a paper-cutter upon the table,—he felt he would like to sit there and look forever.

Adela, meeting the direct gaze of his eyes, suddenly realised that she had known this since that Fourth of July evening, and not known it. It was too bad. What *was* she going to do about it?

She didn't realise that she was also thinking it nice to be looked at in that way. It was the same expression with which Slade had gazed into space, sitting with Coryat up in Christine's.

Oh, this *was* too bad. *Why* would they do it? Couldn't you be friends with anybody—any man. This boy, this child, this infant. He changed visibly before her eyes. He sat in knickerbockers before her, with a smeary freckled face. He sat in short clothes beseeching her with galvanically waving arms and the same bland beatific expression. She wanted to pick him up and comfort him.

How utterly, preposterously absurd! She bent her head slightly to hide her smile at herself. She brushed an imaginary thread from her knee. She began to ask him what he had read lately.

Her eyes were wide open and perfectly candid. She was trying to be entirely kind. She had been a perfect fool to sing to him this morning.

Such a child! Why on earth couldn't he see that Besie——! What was there about *her*? When love wasn't what she wanted at all. At least, she wanted something she

could never have now, wanted someone who wasn't there, never could be . . . Mr. Coryat had been interested, doubtless. Doubtless. Mr. Coryat. O heavens no! Not for a good deal.

But there was a childlike side to Adela, and she was quick to pity.

Her tongue turned question and answer. They were talking about Gilda Varesi's acting in "The Jest". They were talking of modern poetry.

"Yes, I've read a good deal, off and on," said Mrs. Ventress. "Robinson interests me most. He seems to have most to say."

"Don't you like Frost?"

"Oh, of course—'one could do worse than be a swinger of birches'. I adore it—and his philosophically reticent way of presenting tragedy."

"Lindsay?"

"Yes, certainly. 'The Broncho that would not be broken of dancing.' Splendid! He's superb—an electrical person."

"But then, of course," confessed Mrs. Ventress, "I'm one of those old-fashioned people—old-fashioned nowadays—who still swear by and not at the Oxford Book."

"O good!" exclaimed Slade. "So am I. The Scholar Gipsy——"

"Yes, and further back, too," returned Adela. "Don't forget Drayton or Skelton.

"'Near to the silver Trent
Sirena dwelleth——' "

She began to quote in the voice Slade remembered.

"'She to pearl paragon
Turneth thy gravel——' "

He had found the name for her——Sirena, of course. He applauded himself inwardly.

"But *you* must be a poet too," he said with shining eyes, after a short appreciative silence following her quotation.

"No one who wasn't could repeat those things like that."

Adela shook her head.

"I couldn't write a line of poetry to save my life," she said. "It's been a relief, that's all—from, from other things. You see my work, what writing I've ever done, has been so entirely different. After all, I'm not sorry I did it," she added, a trifle defiantly, with a decisive motion of her head, "but I've been rather ruined by it. Oh, well, let's talk of your poetry. Can't you quote me some?"

"I—I don't think I will, if you don't mind, so soon after Sirena," said Slade. "I don't believe your writing has been bad at all, though. What *have* you written? Why won't you tell us?"

Adela shook her head again.

"It's really not worth talking about. Are you interested in drawing, though, as Bessie is? I'd show you——"

"Oh, fine," answered Slade. "Do. I'd like to see them so much."

The next half hour was spent over a portfolio. Mrs. Ventress took a chair nearer him.

"This is something *I* could never do," said Slade. "Where did you study?"

"Oh, I studied at one time, for several years," replied Mrs. Ventress vaguely.

"But this is the best," she reached an arm across his and shook one sheet out from between two others. A quiet, heart-thudding paralysis stole over Slade.

"That's awfully good," he said in a moment, rather breathlessly.

"Well, I did learn at one time a good many of the things soft pencil can do; though I couldn't do anything as good as that to-day. Still, I'm glad I've taken it up again. You see, I could never have been a *really* good draughtsman—or draughtswoman, whichever you say," she ended, smiling, closing the green and black board portfolio and tying up its black strings. "That's all too evident. But I had considerable ambition at one time. Then—well, my life turned a

corner, and I got more interested in writing. But I'm glad I did draw once, if only that it's some help now to your cousin."

"Well, I'll tell you, Bessie appreciates it. You've been simply wonderful to her, Mrs. Ventress. I really think she has a genuine gift. Don't you?"

"I do. And she's lovely. Remarkably fine and sensitive," said Adela, reseating herself in her original chair. "I hope you'll help her all you can to get to New York and get a chance. I shall. For I believe her father is very nice about it and wants her to go, when she's ready?"

"Oh, yes, Uncle Charles is really a brick. Of course it's rather sad for him too. You see——"

"Yes, I know. Bessie has told me."

There was a short silence.

"Do smoke," said Mrs. Ventress then. "I know you want to. As a matter of fact, I do too. You wouldn't be shocked if I did?"

"Certainly not!" said Slade. "Will you have one of mine?"—as she turned to look about on the table.

"Oh, thank you! I will. Oh, Fatimas! I like them."

He held the match. He lit his own.

"I'm not an addict," smiled Adela. "But do you see any possible harm in women smoking?"

"Of course not," said Slade. "Though it's funny. A friend of mine has something to do with the Movies and he told me that when they wanted to symbolise badness in a woman, in a film, all they had to do was to make her light a cigarette. Isn't that ridiculous? He said there was only one way the audience would ever take it."

Mrs. Ventress smiled. She held her cigarette the English way, between forefinger and thumb. She held it daintily away from her. Like most women she did not inhale.

"But you don't think *I'm* bad, do you?" she asked naïvely.

"Well, hardly," rejoined Slade. He had never seen a person more fascinating without meaning to be.

"Silly of me to say that," said Adela, smiling at herself. "I'm a child. I'm afraid I have a pretty silly mind."

"I shouldn't say so," returned Slade earnestly. "I think you have one of the most remarkable minds I ever knew. Really."

He was leaning forward with his elbows on his knees and regarding his cigarette with great intentness. His eyes were morosely thoughtful.

"No, I haven't," said Adela quickly, almost sharply. Her heart was touched, though. She frowned. Inwardly she was shaking herself energetically and roughly. "I really have a very silly mind that I'm trying to turn into a better one. O are you going?" for Slade was murmuring something and rising. "But won't you let me make you some tea?"

Well, he was afraid that——. Why, yes, he would. It was the pleasantest tea he had ever had. They talked of the Theatre Guild and the situation in Ireland, of kings and cabbages—this last quite literally, for Mrs. Ventress had discovered an interest in the vegetable garden on the Battell place as well as in the flower-garden. She informed him that the young Dante had auburn hair, and that the English never shifted their forks from the left to the right hand, that the Irish name of Patrick was principally in honour of General Patrick Sarsfield of Limerick fame, not a tribute to St. Patrick, that W. L. George's full first names were Walter Leonard, and that, in her opinion, he did *not* understand women; that Slade ought to see the Cellini cup in the Metropolitan and that she shared his delight in Vermeer; and all this as an entertaining and unscholastic by-product of smooth and occasionally witty conversation. The quaint reconditeness of her mind interested him immensely. She could kindle with enthusiasm over paintings and books, she could flash with a sudden anger at political tyranny, she could laugh as delightedly as a child, she could suddenly turn as grave as a nun. Through it all there was not the slightest unnaturalness. And in some strange way that he

did not understand Bessie was always entering into the conversation.

"I'm afraid you don't quite see how remarkable she is," said Adela. "It's funny that I should seem to see it so much more clearly. Why is it? Bessie is quite a little wonder. She's going far. You watch her."

It was in the middle of some remark like this, as they sat near each other behind the wicker-trayed wheeled tea-table, that the door-bell rang peremptorily from the hall. Marie must have been out of the house, for it rang again, and then, before Mrs. Ventress could rise, a black-dressed, close black-bonneted figure stood opposite the door, peering first into the northeast parlour. She turned almost immediately and peered directly into the room in which they were sitting. It was Miss Crome.

"Oh, I—I beg your pardon," she murmured hastily and recoiled in a positive flutter. Both Slade and Mrs. Ventress had risen, the latter putting down her cigarette in the saucer of her teacup.

"Oh, won't you come in, Miss Crome? This is Mr. Breckinridge. Do come in and have some tea."

"No—no, thank you," stammered Miss Crome. "I—I was just passing. I merely thought I would call. No. No, indeed, thank you. I must be going. I just stepped in—the bell—no, I really must be going. I am so sorry. I did not mean to intrude. I really did not. I am afraid that I must be going."

The words came from her rapidly, as she averted her face. She had vanished from the doorway and was at the gate by the time Mrs. Ventress had got into the hall. Her black bonnet was bobbing rapidly along the box-hedge. She seemed to accelerate her head and did not look back. Mrs. Ventress stood in her doorway, with Slade just behind her. Her face was puzzled and somewhat irritated.

"That is the most *peculiar* woman," said Adela. "What on earth! What on earth do you suppose was the matter with her?"

"—the most remarkable thing I ever saw——" commented Slade, well-intentioned, if somewhat inaccurate.

"Why *do* you suppose she wouldn't come in and have some tea?" questioned Adela, looking at him blankly.

Slade shook his head. "I'm sure I don't know," said he. His forehead was a little flushed with rising anger. "Idiot!" he muttered, his jaw setting. "I'm terribly sorry——"

"There's nothing to be sorry for," said Mrs. Ventress practically. "Only it annoys me to have that person act as if she had discovered something improper about me. It's rather idiotic. Come back and have some more tea. I suppose she thought it perfectly awful to find me smoking a cigarette on Sunday, in the company of a young and not unattractive male."

Slade flushed a little more. Then he laughed. Mrs. Ventress laughed with him, genuinely.

"Come back and have some more tea," she advised. "Maybe Bessie will drop in after her walk. If I am being very wicked this afternoon I might as well continue. Miss Crome, after all, may as well be forgotten. She seems to me rather more impertinent than pertinent."

Adela had analysed Miss Crome's emotions exactly, except that she had not credited her with the secret high delight now almost stifling her heart with its intensity. "Cigarettes—on *Sunday*" she hissed from between properly pursed lips. Her small teeth gritted. "Cigarettes on *Sunday*! . . . And that young *man*!" she added, with a significant balefulness in the thought of Slade's sex. "That young *man*!"

She hugged the truth to herself deliciously. She almost staggered in her walk with the choiceness of her private information. It so perfectly bore out—well, everything.

She was passing Mrs. Hoyle's large iron-fenced lawn. It was four o'clock. Across the lawn she suddenly noted a stout figure proceeding up Ivy Street. It turned the corner of the fence into the Axter Road and came toward her.

She had thought it was Arthur Pollock, at first. Who

could it be, though? It was certainly no one she knew.

It was a large man in a rather flashy grey-checked suit. He had dove-coloured spats to his now dusty brown shoes. He wore a round-crowned Panama. As he came nearer she noted the gold pin in his peacock-green necktie, the seal ring on the third finger of his left hand, the bright gold and red cigar-band on the cigar he rolled in his mouth, the flicker of his light cane. His face was ruddy, jowl and double chin sufficiently evident. She was for slipping rapidly past him, but he raised his hat and spoke to her.

"Pardon me, Madam," he held the cigar with the hat. "Lookin' for a Miss Ventress' place. Understand it's along here. Could you direct me?"

He beamed upon her. He puffed from his walk, blowing out his cheeks.

"Oh—why certainly, yes, you—you go right along—the way you're going. You pass two streets, and it's the last house, the corner lot, just before you reach the Farm Road. Are—are you a friend of hers?"

"Friend? Oh, yes, say so, old friend," he vouchsafed affably. "Right up along here? Thanks. Much obliged."

Miss Crome tried to incline her head with slow dignity. She achieved a bob. At the corner she turned and, trepidatingly, found the gentleman looking back at *her*. She hurried past the protecting corner of Mrs. Hoyle's house; then slowed her steps, stopped, fluttered. Her hand went up to her back hair. She retraced her steps slowly, cautiously, gazing at the ground as if for something she had lost. She peered past the corner of Mrs. Hoyle's house, advancing inch by inch, head down, eyes on the cinder foot-path, looking for the imaginary lost hairpin.

Inch by inch. He wasn't there. She came boldly out beyond Mrs. Hoyle's house and peered up the road. He was trudging along steadily, swinging his cane. Miss Crome's bosom boiled with excitement. What was happening? Outraged husband, discovered lover,—her mind leapt to this immediately, and yet, even to her it seemed

a little improbable. Or, to put it more accurately, perhaps, it seemed a little too good to be true. But what and who and why? Her mind bristled with interrogation points. She had advanced to the corner of the fence before she knew it. He was not looking back. He was in his stride, swinging along under the occasional maples, quite brandishing his stick, though in a wholly *insouciant* fashion,—turning his head to look out over the fields, followed by a thin wavering trail of cigar-smoke.

He had passed Sycamore, Poplar, diminishing in the distance. But the road took an almost imperceptible rise at this point, enough to keep him in view. Miss Crome could see where the Battell hedge began. She distinctly saw him stop midway along it, disappear.

She would go back and call on the Rogers. They had the next house to Mrs. Ventress's, separated on that side by a screen of trees. But as she hesitated, she perceived another distant figure coming down the Axter Road, a slimmer figure, straw-hatted, walking slowly. It passed the Rogers as Miss Crome bristled back to the protection of Mrs. Hoyle's house. It turned into Poplar Street and disappeared. That Mr. Breckinridge, of course,—that young man! What had happened? Miss Crome suddenly perceived Mrs. Hoyle beckoning her from between the curtains of a front window. The door opened and Mrs. Hoyle came out on the porch.

"I saw you passing, and stopping, Sophia. Have you lost something?" she called.

But the something Miss Crome was seeking she had no intention of losing.

"Just a hairpin," she replied. "I've got it though."

"Come in and have a cup of tea," said Mrs. Hoyle. At the invitation Miss Crome almost bounced through the gate. From the side window of the Hoyle parlour, by skillful manœuvring, she felt sure she could see the return of the stout loudly-dressed man. Of course, he might go down the Farm Road. That was really the quickest way back to

the Station. But she must take that chance. She wondered where he had come from? While sipping her tea she inquired casually as to evening trains to the Junction.

"Why, so far as I know, Sophia, there's only the one every Sunday evening," returned Mrs. Hoyle. "That one comes through here 'bout eight o'clock."

"Of course. Of course," said Miss Crome, nodding with pursed lips. She was not going to spoil her secret until she had acquired more evidence. This new development——. There was plenty of time.

He would have to stay in town till eight o'clock. Would he have supper with Mrs. Ventress? What could be his errand? It was simply *too* exciting. Miss Crome's teacup trembled in her hand till Mrs. Hoyle enquired whatever was the matter with her. Miss Crome declared that there was nothing—absolutely nothing. She had never felt better in her life. Which was, to be sure, no less than the truth.

Slade had been taking his leave when the stout figure swung in at the gate. He turned on the steps as the gate clicked. He heard Adela's breath indrawn. He turned again to find her staring with some perturbation at the stranger. Slade lingered.

"Pardon *me*," began the man. "How *do*——"

"Yes," said Mrs. Ventress rather hurriedly to Slade.

"Yes, good-bye, good-bye, do come in again, Mr. Breckinridge!"

It would undoubtedly be best for him to go. He took in the bland stoutness of the stranger, and his slight leeriness, with dislike. But he went out of the gate, after bidding a formal good-bye. He glanced once over the hedge. The stranger was ascending the porch steps. Slade heard,

"Well, how *do*, Miss——"

He walked off slowly, wondering.

He wondered considerably. Evidently not her husband. In so many ways, what a remarkable afternoon! How much was he in love with her? But who on earth was the stout person? Oh, probably just someone he had never seen be-

fore, who lived in Tupton. But he didn't look like a Tupton character! He bore unmistakable earmarks of the city. Cheap though. What on earth had he to do with Mrs. Ventress?

She was certainly one of the most attractive women he had ever met. *Was* she still married? She was so fine, so absolutely sincere, so pretty, so wise, so witty. But of course she couldn't be interested in him in the slightest. Being kind.

What on earth was that woman doing down by the Hoyle's fence? It certainly had looked like Miss Crome.

As he approached the Gedney house, after turning into Poplar, he saw Bessie coming up the street from the opposite direction. He waved to her. She moved through the sun-speckled shadow of the tall horse-chestnut trees. Slade was first at the gate and waited for her. She was somewhat dusty and breathless.

"Find your friend all right? Have a nice walk?" he smiled.

"Yes. Oo, I'm tired though. Have a nice time at Adela's?"

"Yes. I went over. She showed me some of her drawings. She certainly is awfully nice."

Bessie gave him a keen glance.

"She's a darling," she said, though with a rather prim mouth. She ran up the steps quickly, Slade following at his leisure. He was still wondering about the stout gentleman in the rather loud suit.

CHAPTER XXI: ON A QUIET EVENING

JASON DUFFITT was eating a late cold supper that Pansie had left for him in the ice-box when his door-bell rang. He had been nervous about all sounds lately, and it was a queer hour for anyone to call on him. A figure of stout proportions stood in the shadow of the vines of the porch.

"You don't remember me, I'll bet," said the broad figure, having removed a round-crowned panama and applied a coloured silk handkerchief to a beady brow. It extended a pudgy, broad-fingered hand. "But I seen your name on your office and asked round. Gotta take that eight-ten out o' here. H'are ye, Jase, anyway. Remember me?"

Jason came out of the door, started to shake his head. Then,

"Why, *sure*, sure, Podge. Sure I do. Gosh, I ain't seen you fer five or six years, must be. Well, if this ain't funny. Comical. How's the world been treatin' you anyway? Come in! I was jest gettin' m'self a snack. Have anythin'? (He slowly closed one eye.) No? Thanks, don't mind if I do," as he accepted a cigar. "Set down, Podge. Well, man, you're lookin' fine. Gosh, if this ain't comical!"

The screen-door had flacked to behind them. Some animated conversation ensued.

Miss Crome's vigil, though she stayed at Mrs. Hoyle's almost till dinner-time, had been totally unsuccessful. He *had* stayed at Mrs. Ventress's to dinner. He would be taking that eight o'clock train after. Miss Crome bade her hostess farewell, descended Ivy Street and crossed Market to Oak. She got herself some supper about six-thirty and had occasion to wander up past the Post-Office to the Sta-

tion about three-quarters of an hour later. She wandered back again in the cool of the evening, meeting several ladies with whom she stopped to chatter for considerable periods. Nearing Oak again she nearly ran into the individual of her real search just turning out of it. To her surprise she saw that he was walking with Jason Duffitt.

"How do, Miss Crome," said the latter in passing. He tipped his faded straw, and his companion lifted a panama and nodded affably enough in recognition.

"Who's that female, Jase? She directed me up there to—to Miss—er—Ventress——"

"Mrs. Ventress?" Duffitt almost halted. Then, with a nervous look in his eyes, "That who you were callin' on?"

His companion remembered Adela's parting words. "I am extremely sorry but I trust you to keep my secret." He had promised. Still, it riled him. It certainly did rile him. He had hoped so——.

"Yeah," he said uninformatively. "Know her?" His eyes looked keenly at his companion, an old school friend.

"Sure," said Duffitt, recovering somewhat from suspicion. "Rented her that house. Comes from N'York. What do you know about her?"

"She's all right. Guess you found that out before you rented her the house didn't you?"

"Oh, sure. Good references. Perf'ly sat'sfactory. But there's been a lotta talk about her. Money end's been all reglar enough. But she's a queer one, sorta. People don't like her. There's somethin' queer——"

"How's that?"

"Well, it ain't my place to say nothin', perhaps; but she's got queer opinions, and who's her husband anyway, an' where is he? I got talkin' to her one day. She's got queer opinions."

His secret fears as to the upshot of his recent assininity had never materialised. Adela had made no sign. From day to day he had breathed more freely and gone about his business. Still, he felt that something was hovering

over him, and he wasn't going to let a chance slip to insinuate things opposed to the real truth if he built up thereby some kind of a wall of defence.

"Funny ideas. She don't seem to me a good infloonce on this town——"

"Aw, that's all yuh know, Jase. She's all right. Ye're crazy. She's all right. Why, she's——"

He stopped. He saw that in saying anything further he wouldn't be keeping his promise. Still, he was riled. As train-time got nearer and he plainly saw that he was departing with his confident plan utterly ruined, it certainly riled him and worked him the wrong way.

So, "Course there *is* a kinda mystery," he hinted, his conscience, it must be said, twingeing him. After all he was not at all a bad-hearted person. But women were certainly aggravating.

Duffitt was on him like a flash.

"What say? Kinda mystery?"

"Well," said the stout man, pulling on his cigar. But no—should he betray her. Dirty. Still—business was business. Might result in——.

"That name——" he said. They had come to the station platform and he set down upon it the light bag he had picked up at the Conestoga House. The two men stood, hearing the far whistle of the approaching train, feeling the faint vibration of it, coming round the curve from Barrack Falls.

"Yes?" asked Duffitt, teetering and waving a greeting to a wandering acquaintance. "Yes, well, what about her name?"

The train was near. The hiss of air brakes and the loud rumbling racket of its approach almost drowned out the stout man's words, as he hitched up his bag. The black puffing engine had slid to a stop beyond them before he had made his meaning quite clear.

"That name Ventress. That ain't her real name. That's all I'll tell ye," he blurted out. "Well, s'long, Jase. S'long. Any time y' git t' N'York look me up."

He had heavily climbed the steps and was waving from the moving train. Duffitt stood and stared after its tail-lights, as it clanged slowly up Market Street. So many thoughts were working within him that he had forgotten to wave back.

He met Miss Crome again opposite Elm Street. Miss Crome seemed to be especially peripatetic this evening. His eyes lit as they fell upon her. He stopped to talk.

"What d'ye know about that, Miss Crome?" he asked, after a weighty exposition. He could not keep a note of exultation out of his voice. "Fact though. This feller's 'n ole frien' o' mine. Said he wasn't at lib'ty to tell me why he was down here. I know he's in some big corp'ration up in New York, but he acted indef'nite. Wouldn't tell me his business. Finally though he comes out with *that*, just as he was gettin' on th' train. Sounds mighty queer, don't it? Ain't her rele name. Whaddya know about that anyway?"

Miss Crome's head swam that night as she tried to compose herself for sleep. She felt that she was in the midst of the most throbbing melodrama. She was a little frightened, in fact, by some of the suspicions aroused in her breast. Mr. Duffitt's friend *had* had supper at Mrs. Ventress's. He had stayed there from four o'clock until nearly half-past seven. What his errand had been no one knew. He had conveyed the startling information that Mrs. Ventress's apparent name was not her real name. What did his acquaintance with her signify? And what of this young Mr. Breckinridge she was most evidently trying to lead astray? What of it all? What of it all indeed? Miss Crome's head began to throb till she had to arise and hunt for the squat blue bottle of bromo-seltzer.

* * *

Meanwhile Slade and his cousin Bessie had passed a quiet evening. He was puzzled certainly by the later developments of his visit to Mrs. Ventress's, but he explained the appearance of the stranger acceptably enough to himself by

the phrase, "None of my business—why shouldn't she have a caller?"

That evening Uncle Arthur had asked them all to his house to dinner, and now Slade and Bessie had been strolling down dim-lit Sycamore Street. They had stood on the other side of Market as the evening train went by. Slade saw a man's face he thought he recognised at one window. The tail-lights dwindled down the street.

"It's sad, isn't it," Bessie said in a small voice, as if to herself. Her head was turned away. Slade was roused from one of his reveries.

"Sad? What? How do you mean, Bess?"

"Oh, you'll think it silly. That train made me sad for a minute. Listen, you can't hear it now. The sound of the bell's dying over the bridge."

"I know what you mean, though. I've lain awake listening to the whistle of trains in the night—going somewhere."

"You're nice not to laugh, Slade," her voice was soft. "Oh, my, how much easier it is for men than it is for women!"

Slade did not even smile at that. She went on with a rush,

"Men can pick up and 'pull out' as they call it. Men can make their lives what they want them. Men can go away to other places and live as they want to. It's all right for *men*." There was scorn in her emphasis. "*We're* supposed to stay around and keep house and look pretty."

Her cousin had never heard anything like this from her before. Her tone hurt him, for her. He dug the toe of his shoe in the edge of the road and looked down.

"Yes, I guess that's about it," he said gruffly.

"Well, I *am* going to get to New York and I *am* going to make my living and live as I want to. You see if I don't," said Bessie decidedly. "Only, what on earth *will* I do about father?"

"The whole trouble is he's such a perfect *dear*," she went on. "What would he ever do without me? Just what? That may sound conceited, but it's really not. I try to do

things for him and amuse him. I do try. He would miss me around the house. Of course he has enough to live on the rest of his life, without his doing anything, but he just shuts himself up all the time with his books and reads and reads. That's what he likes, I know,—that's what makes him happy. But he depends on me too. I can't think of him as all alone in that house, even with Uncle Arthur so near, all alone and missing me. He'd do it for me I know. Oh, well, Slade, you have troubles of your own. After all, I've got a lot to live yet; and father's not. I can help myself, he can't. I shouldn't yelp."

"You're not *yelping*," said Slade. "I see. I understand. I guess I never gave it much thought. I get selfish. But, listen, Bess, it can be fixed up. I'm sure. It will all come right."

"Just how?"

She looked up at him with dark and brooding eyes.

"Gertrude took it—her happiness. Poor Gertrude. She broke away. But I haven't Gertrude's excuse. You see I know all about it. I—I've pieced it all together. I've drawn it out of father bit by bit, though he firmly believes he's never told me anything. I've done a lot of thinking about Gertrude. I don't blame her. Her mother was too much for her—and too much for father too, for that matter. And Gertrude must have been different from me—wilder. O Slade, do you really think she ever found her happiness?"

He had never known his cousin in such a grave mood. Usually there was merely affectionate bantering between them. Bessie was not the kind that told her troubles. Now her confidence in him touched him.

"I certainly hope so. I believe so," he stammered.

"But you don't really, do you?" The dark eyes searched his. Not a child but a woman was questioning him. "You think—and I believe—I believe—she's—dead."

The last word was only breathed. They turned slowly and re-entered Sycamore. Slade was still looking at the ground.

"Well, even if she were, Bessie," he said finally and softly,

"there's no harm in believing she was happy in the life she made for herself."

"I wonder," he said after a while, pondering. "I wonder if I could ask you something?"

She glanced at him quickly and was away from his shoulder to the inner edge of the path. She halted facing him.

"What is it? Gee, I'm sorry," murmured Slade, halting too.

"No, go on," said Bessie in a dry voice.

"Why, I was only going to say, I wonder—you see Father has a theory——"

She was in step with him again, they were resuming their slow walk.

"Father has this theory," continued Slade slowly, "that Uncle Charles heard from—from her—after—after her mother's death. Do you——"

He saw that her head was slowly nodding. "Yes," she said, just audibly.

"Truly? How do you know?"

Bessie looked up at him, her face quite pale. She did not answer immediately. There had been a Gordon setter in Slade's boyhood, a favourite dog of his father's, dead some ten years ago. It used to sit and look up at you, following the movements of your head and hand with its own head, eyes never leaving your face. A beautiful, noble, faithful creature. The gaze came back to Slade poignantly, as he looked at Bessie. He felt his own eyes burn suddenly, for some inexplicable reason. What on earth was the matter with him? A warmth grew about his heart.

"You'd think me horrible," said his cousin, dropping her eyes abruptly. "You'd think me perfectly horrid."

His mouth and eyes went open. "Wha-at? Why, I couldn't possibly, Bess. What do you mean?"

"I've read her letter," she said, her face still turned from him. Her voice did not quiver. It was a little louder than breathing.

He found nothing to say for the few seconds that elapsed

before her words rushed on in a voice low but perfectly distinct.

"I found it. Two years ago. I came in for something and found it on his desk. He had gone out and forgotten to lock it up. I didn't know what it was. Then I guessed. It was open. Out of the envelope. I knew it was Gertrude, of course. It opened, 'Dearest Father'. It was dated the month after her mother's death—from England. I couldn't go out of the room without knowing, then. I *couldn't*. I *couldn't*. I read it all through."

"Well, why shouldn't you?" asked Slade defensively. "I don't see any harm in that. It hasn't hurt anybody, has it?"

Again her face turned to him. Her hand was on his arm.

"You don't think so, do you?" she said quickly, "and, Slade,—you'll never tell?"

"I should say not," he returned stoutly. "Nonsense. Of course it's all right. Tell me, though,—tell me—about——"

"Oh, she said she was so sorry. That she was very unhappy. That she had been unhappy for a long time. That it had been her pride. There must have been a big scene of some kind, you know, shortly before she ran away—with her mother. She sort of hinted too at something else. It sounded as though she had been married, and been unhappy, and they had separated. She told father how much she loved him. She had never meant to hurt *him*. All about her pride too, and that she had made up her mind she wasn't going to come back beaten, if things went wrong with her, or worry him with *her* troubles. Then she ended by saying that he musn't worry about her now. She was all right, had a good position, was doing some writing. She sent him all the love she had for anyone, she said. She had just heard of her mother's death. She knew about me. She explained a lot about how it had been between her mother and her. But there must have been a—a love-affair too. I don't understand, though,—certainly I've never heard from anybody around here that there was anything like that. I think I know all father knows, and he thinks nothing of the kind.

But I could read it in the letter, even if it wasn't written out."

"What—where did the letter come from, you say?"

"From England—London—she was evidently over there as a sort of secretary-companion to a rich woman."

"And he never told you?"

"No. Never. He must have worked it all out by himself and decided it was better not to. She told him where to send an answer, if he wanted to. It wasn't her real address. I don't know whether he ever did or not."

"Strange. It's all very strange," said Slade.

They had come opposite the Pollock house and Bessie's last words had been in a very low voice. Slade nodded only. But he slipped his arm through his cousin's and suddenly gripped her hand, withdrawing his own immediately. Then they went up the steps together to the dim forms of their two relatives on the porch above.

CHAPTER XXII: WHO SHE MIGHT BE

SLADE took a morning train back on Monday as he had to be in the city by evening. He and Bessie together ran over a moment to allow him a formal good-bye to Adela. They found her in her garden as usual. She did not refer to her Sunday caller of the afternoon before. Nor did Slade. She put in Bessie's hand a flower for Slade's button-hole. Bessie walked back with him to the house and down with him to the station.

As the train pulled out he waved to her and she waved back at him with bright eyes. There was no badinage. He sat looking straight ahead of him for several minutes as the train clanged through the town. His interest in the dusty plush back of the seat in front of him seemed enormous.

Between Tupton and the Pennsylvania Station in New York, with time out for a change at the Junction, there was plenty of opportunity for reflection. Slade extracted a novel from his bag but let it lie unopened upon the maroon seat. He rested his chin upon his hand and gazed out upon the dipping and soaring telegraph wires combed through their green glass insulators on the tall double-armed poles that rose at him and flashed past by the wayside. Behind them the country was sunny and green. But the heat of the day was oppressive. He removed his coat and suffered from sifting cinders that ticked against the wire netted open space at the bottom of the window. He felt both grimy and deliquescent.

Really, it was all darned interesting. The manuscript, Terrill's mysterious book, Mrs. Ventress, Gertrude, Mrs. Ventress's visitor, Coryat, Bessie . . . They mixed in his mind to the rhythm of the train, the surging sound of it

mingled with the clicking of rail-joints and the creak and clank of couplings. His head wagged against the maroon back of the seat as he closed his eyes. . . .

Mrs. Ventress's face, in surprise, in alarm. No, not at that loud-suited individual's greeting so much,—at his own mention of Richard Coryat. No, *she* had supplied the "Richard". That's so. She knew him through acquaintances. But still, but still. . . .

And—wasn't there some confusion about the book? Something queer about the whole thing. He didn't know just what. Of *course* that man wasn't her husband! Coryat? But how on earth could that be. Impossible. Names. . . .

He was conscious of a voice that penetrated to him over the back of the seat ahead, of two nodding bonnets that had not been there before. He did not recognise the two Miss Babbitts, going to Philadelphia. They had fussily changed their seats. But he was conscious of the voice because it had just said "Mrs. Ventress" in a derogatory tone. "Aha, aha, aha," came the queerly mechanical laugh of the other Miss Babbitt.

". . . if you think it's just silly . . . for Sophia saw him herself——"

"No, it's probably true," the sister answered. "She's a most peculiar woman and it's probably quite true. But who could he have been?"

"No one knows. Except that he was rather loudly dressed and was there practically *all* the afternoon, and stayed to supper certainly. He left on the eight-ten."

"He said it wasn't her *real* name?"

"So Jason Duffitt swore to Sophia. She's a thorough *minx* in my opinion. And who knows anything about her. Don't you think it was extremely rude of her the way she called so casually on Mrs. Mixter, after she'd been to dinner there? And then she goes mysteriously out of town for several days—and then this strange man turns up. But

you see it's all of a piece. And little Mrs. Persons says she has a really horridly insinuating way with men."

"What did you say he looked like?"

"Who? Oh, *he!* Like a drummer, like a flashy type of travelling salesman. Caroline Utterson saw him too. He passed her house coming back. I believe he's her husband." She meant Adela's.

"Oh, *no*, Phoebe," said the younger Miss Babbitt, incredulous. "I don't really believe he could be."

"Well, what then. Do you think he could be a relative?"

"He must have been. So she isn't what she represents herself to be?"

"Well, I trust Sophia. That's all I know."

"But then, who *is* she?"

"Who knows? I think she's a wealthy divorcée from New York myself. This man might have been—who might he not have been. Why did he stay the entire afternoon?"

"Well, really now, Phoebe, I think Sophia *has* rather infected your mind. He was probably merely a relative. . . ."

"But *such* a relative!"

"Yes. Well, after all, Phoebe, she may not be to the manner born, for all her airs. She didn't seem so, in fact, to me, when I first met her. Her manner is so flippant and casual. Oh, no, these people creep in everywhere nowadays. But (with high rectitude) I refuse to believe ill of *anyone* until it is proved. Did you say Aunt Sara would meet us at the Broad Street Station?"

Slade thought that the person they were discussing bore no more actual resemblance to the charming individual he had had tea with on Sunday than did Bloody Mary to Atalanta. He was extremely annoyed. So this was the kind of thing! As for that man, he might have been—oh, well, never mind; good Lord, who cared! Anyone with an eye could see what *she* really was. As for this business of her name not being her own—hm. Well, suppose it wasn't? Nobody like that——. Oh, the old cackling hens, what preposterous spinsterish nonsense! At this point in

his exasperated thought he recalled Dr. Gedney's answer on the way home from that Fourth of July affair,—an answer to some spontaneously enthusiastic remark of Slade's.

"Arthur is so absurd about her!"

"But what does he say, Uncle Charles?"

"Oh, that he distrusts her. Maybe he changed his opinion to-night. But you know, probably, how Arthur has been about women, ever since Miriam's death. I was certainly very pleasantly impressed by her this evening."

"Does he mind Bessie and her being together so much?"

"Oh, yes. You know Bessie is Arthur's ewe-lamb. And I believe there is some sort of talk in the town. But isn't there always. (Dr. Gedney's lip had curled.) Look at the ridiculous, criminally ridiculous things that were said after Gertrude—after Gertrude ran away. I simply paid no attention. There's no nonsense about Bessie. She knows the substance from the shadow. Mrs. Ventress came here with excellent recommendations—or however you put it—from New York. She has lived in a very quiet and dignified way. Of course, there are some outrageous gossips in this town; that Miss Crome, for instance——"

Slade wondered, remembering, whether either of the stiff angular women on the seat ahead could be Sophia Crome.

Well, it was interesting at any rate. What a wonderful companion——bosh! Of what was he thinking. He knew now. It had been completely evident to him in her dismissal of him at the approach of that stout person—she didn't really care, couldn't possibly—how could she? Why, but she was married, wasn't she? He suddenly smiled very wryly at his own goings-on. If he wasn't a blasted idiot! She had been extremely nice to him and he had let himself go, in a day-dream . . . When the stout person approached she had hustled him off absent-mindedly . . . That was all right, of course. But, equally of course,—oh, what an ass he had been! But she *was* wonderful. He would always admire her anyway. . . .

Bessie had never seen Gertrude. What a peculiar girl

Gertrude must have been,—what an extremely peculiar woman his Aunt Martha! What a tragedy when it all happened! He wondered if there *had* been a love-affair for Gertrude. He wondered. Was she still in London? Suppose she were, by any chance, in New York. Suppose under a changed name, if she had married, she were now wealthy and famous. Suppose . . . by George!

Slade's eyes opened. His brow wrinkled. What *did* Mrs. Ventress write? Suppose . . . Oh, what nonsense! What a nut he was! What an utter nut! His imagination again. He was always spinning impossible stories about people. Gertrude. Mrs. Ventress. What nonsense!

Nevertheless he wondered. . . .

* * *

Upon his return to the office on Tuesday, Slade learned all about the feminine claimant to authorship of the mysterious "Crystal Castle". He also learned that she had *not* put in an appearance on Monday. Not at all. Coryat had come in and enquired for him, leaving his first article. Toward the end of a crowded afternoon, Coryat's voice floated into his ear blurred by the telephone-receiver.

"Hello! Have a good time? I left my first article with your chief yesterday. Oh, he told you? Did that phantasmal young woman turn up to-day? No? Isn't it damned curious?"

"You know I believe you're all kidding me," said Slade, holding the 'phone in his lap and turning an eye on Miss Peabody opposite. "There wasn't really any bright young female, was there?"

"All I know is your Chief swore to me that there was, and told me all she had said."

"Ha!" said Miss Peabody with mock-acidity as she caught Slade's "Really?" "Ha! Corroboration, I see, corroboration!"

"Well," laughed Slade into the mouthpiece, "I refuse to believe it until I see her, that's all. It strikes me as entirely

too melodramatic. Oh, by the way, I have a startling bit of news for you. . . .

"Yeah. Remember that friend of my cousin's I spoke to you about? Yeah. Well, it seems she owns Terrill's book and has read it. Honestly . . . No, I didn't; *because* she said she had left her copy in town. She comes from here, you know . . . What? No, neither did I, from what you told me—but it seems there are three anyway, you, your friend and my friend . . . Yes, you ought to. She's a most charming person . . . Oh, she writes. I don't know. She never will tell us just *what* she writes. She's rather mysterious about it . . . Dinner? Why—let's see—why, yes, I guess I can make it. What time?"

So it happened that that evening Slade and Richard Coryat again sat facing each other across a small table, this time in the rear open dining-room of the Golden Eagle on MacDougall Street.

"Look here, who *is* this friend of your cousin's, this Mrs. Ventress?" inquired Coryat directly. "You certainly interested me a lot by what you said over the 'phone."

"Mrs. Ventress? Why, I've told you all I know about her, and that I think she's an exceptionally charming person," returned Slade, his eyes betraying fear of teasing. "She's been awfully nice to my cousin. She evidently lives here in the city mostly and writes. As I said over the 'phone, we've never been able to find out just *what* she writes; and she implies that she's given it up. She's taken to drawing again—she really draws awfully well. She studied it some years ago. Your guess is as good as mine. Only she's evidently well-off and quite independent, possibly with a husband somewhere, but I've never heard her speak of him, or of her family. I don't know, I'm sure, whether her husband is dead or—well, of course, she may be divorced. I believe it's rather set opinion in the town against her that she's never produced her husband. There's some mystery there. She's a woman, I should say, of about thirty, maybe older. She looks very young sometimes, though. (Coryat

repressed a smile.) She has a fine mind, knows good poetry, told me all sorts of interesting things. I should think she had travelled. Sounds like it. She's the kind of person who would have been likely to pick up Terrill's book in London and treasure it—distinctly the kind. She was certainly enthusiastic about it. She knew your name, by the way."

"Knew *my* name—how?"

"Through mutual acquaintances, she said. Knew of your knowing about the book."

"That's funny. I know so few people in New York. You see I have been abroad such a long time. It might have been someone in England—if she's been over there. But——"

"She didn't specify. It might."

"That seems funny to me though—funny that I shouldn't have heard the name. The name I was thinking of the other night——"

He paused.

"I'm puzzled, and I'm interested in this," he said again, after a moment. "What does she look like? Tell me more about her."

"You do seem to think you know her," laughed Slade. "Well, she's about the average height. Looks tall sometimes. Brown hair, brown eyes, dresses charmingly. Oval face—I don't know, did you ever try describing a woman? Has nice eyes, is witty and quick. Gosh, it sounds like a 'Situation Wanted' in the *Times*!"

Coryat smiled.

"That certainly might describe a number of quite different people at that. She looks successful, does she?"

"Well, she evidently has enough money and has not led a particularly hard life, lately anyhow. Her writing doesn't seem to have pleased her——"

"Oh, it doesn't," said Coryat. "Then that wouldn't be—but, by George, I wonder——"

"What do you wonder?"

"Sorry, Breckinridge. I always seem to be doing this. But the fact is I speculate sometimes—oh, well! . . . Well,

you come in with a mysterious feminine person, and my mind leaps to probably inane conclusions, that's all. And then this matter of her having read 'Golden Windfall'. That's peculiar too. And then this mysterious claimant of authorship of Terrill's story—for that's what I think it is . . . I'd certainly like to take a look at that lady of yours!"

"Well certainly nothing's to prevent your coming down to Tupton with me next time I go," offered Slade. "Uncle Charles or Uncle Arthur could put you up. I'd like nothing better than to have you. Come along!"

"Well, that's mighty kind of you. When are you going again?"

"Oh, I don't know. I don't believe I can get off again for two weeks anyway, and then I'd have to leave there on Sunday. Still—though I'd intended taking my two weeks' vacation at the end of August, I might manage to advance it."

"Well I really am strongly tempted to take you up. Meanwhile, it seems that this claimant has vanished from the face of the earth."

"Yes, doesn't it. Maybe she'll come in to-morrow. Wonder what on earth happened to her?"

"I wonder. I wish to blazes the friend of mine who borrowed 'Golden Windfall' would make some sign. I have no idea where she is, and——"

"Oh, she's a woman!"

"Yes,—she's a woman,—a darn fine one too."

Again Coryat was tempted to tell Slade all about Flora. Yet, just because he actually found himself missing her, for all their brief and curtailed acquaintance, he refrained. He wished to keep Flora out of this. He had had certain absurd suspicions of course. And then too—he had recently had a peculiar dream.

He had stood in front of a misty blank window and seen two figures moving dimly about behind it. One suddenly blurred nearer and larger, and a white face pressed against the pane. It was Flora's face, distinctly recognisable. But

he stared straight into his eyes without the slightest recognition. And as he looked, her face faded, and he was looking into the eyes of—Jane. Then her face faded also. But before it faded she had smiled at him. There were tears in her eyes no longer. And as he stared he was reading some words in gigantic type upon what seemed to be the huge opened page of a book. They were the opening words of Richard Terrill's first chapter in "Golden Wind-fall", in which he analyses the strange purblindness of the seeking soul. Then that great page of terrifying black type faded too . . . He could make nothing of the dream.

But he was thinking of it as he lit his cigarette from the match Slade held. He would say nothing. He would find out for himself.

"It's an easy trip," Slade was saying. "It's not so very far from Philadelphia. Mrs. Ventress had been visiting there for a day or so, when I came down. I didn't see her Saturday as I expected. She got back some time late Saturday night. She must have friends in Philadelphia——."

"Indeed," returned Coryat slowly. He was thinking.

"This woman who turned up at the office," he said after a moment. "She, for instance, as well as the friend I mentioned, would answer to the description you gave of Mrs. Ventress."

"Would she?" asked Slade. "But what do you mean?"

"Well, old T. B., as you call him, said she was about average height but looked taller when she stood up about to go. She seems to have had brown hair and brown eyes, according to your general description, though of course people's memories differ as to the shade of colour in eyes. Miss Peabody spoke of her as having 'considerable distinction' and believes she *did* write the story. She seems to have been something of a personality——"

"But what are you getting at," laughed Slade. "You mean to imply that Mrs. Ventress could have come all the way to New York and——. Besides, that's implying she knowingly imitated Terrill's style, which would be a literary crime.

Besides, again, this woman said she had written 'Golden Windfall'!"

"Well, my dear Breckinridge, *we* don't really know who wrote 'Golden Windfall'. Do we?"

"But,—why, good heavens! You mean to say——?"

"I don't mean to say anything. I'm just thinking. Probably I'm way off. But your friend is agitated when you mention Terrill's book. You said she was. You know she writes, but she's mysterious about it. She's away from Tupton for several days, not back till very late Saturday night. Well, if she left here on the eleven o'clock train she'd have been in Tupton by eleven that night—that was the train you took, wasn't it? And she *could* conceivably have come on to New York, instead of stopping at Philadelphia. She has plenty of money to indulge herself in such a trip, plenty of time on her hands. This claimant was in *The Colosseum* office only till about 10:15, according to what your Chief told me. That gives her time to catch her train and——"

Slade was somewhat staggered.

"But she said she knew *you*?"

"Only through mutual acquaintances. Anyone may meet an anonymous author sometime without knowing it. 'Richard Terrill' may be an assumed name. I've never thought of it before—I had a picture of the man so clearly in my mind—but it *may* be. And all that I'm saying may be proved the most utter nonsense, but——"

"But why didn't she turn up with her proofs? Why all this concealment? I don't understand."

"Neither do I. I'm just guessing—maybe wildly——"

"You gentlemen feel in any need of inspiration this evening? Are you familiar with the psychological properties of my soul candy? Ah, pardon me, I see you are engaged——" It was Tiny Tim, bare-headed, with white shirt and flowing black hair and tie. He passed with friendship's offering in neat packages upon his tray. He stopped at the next table and engaged in a philosophical dissertation

with a gentleman in cloaks and suits. The lady with the gentleman kept up an uninterrupted giggle.

"Well," said Slade, "you've certainly given me something to think about. What do you say? Shall we go?"

As they paused before the counter-gate in the outer hall, where the Frenchwoman in attendance procured their hats, Coryat said,

"I *will* take advantage of your invitation if it still holds, and go down with you when you go next. Meanwhile, well, let us wait and find out."

"All right," said Slade. "You mean 'don't say anything about it'. I won't. Of course, as *you* say, it may all be a pipe-dream. It certainly has that appearance to me—and yet—— Well, all I know is that Mrs. Ventress is as straight as a string as well as being a remarkably interesting woman. If by any wild possibility she *were* Richard Terrill, she's given up attempting to convince old T. B. for some very good reason."

"Oh, I'm sure of that," said Coryat hastily. "There's no question of that. But then——"

As he walked home up Fourth Avenue later in the evening he wondered—he certainly wondered——

CHAPTER XXIII: IT COMES TO MISS CROME

TWO weeks passed, Miss Ann Cole had not reappeared at *The Colosseum* office. "The Crystal Castle" still reposed in the safe. Slade, busied with many manuscripts, with foundry proofs and "signatures", with constant callers, luncheon engagements and dinner engagements, with Rafe's affairs and the affairs of other friends, almost forgot Tup-ton in the interim. Mrs. Ventress recurred occasionally. Bessie entered his thoughts as often. He speculated a good deal about the author of "The Crystal Castle". He had come greatly to discount Coryat's wild conjecture. But in his peregrinations about the Village he often stopped and looked after ladies with brown eyes and brown hair, even if the latter were bobbed. Rafe began to rag him about it.

Bessie wrote him, a pleasant, friendly letter, informing him that everything was much as he had left it in the small town. She inveighed again in no uncertain terms against Miss Crome and village gossip in general. She also suspected Jason Duffitt of secretly running down Adela's reputation. She was not so far mistaken.

They were much together these days, Jason and Miss Crome. Jason would come over and sit on Miss Crome's cushioned stone stoop of an evening, if he were passing by,—and he usually was, somehow. On one of these evenings Miss Crome hit upon a most remarkable elucidation of the principal matter that had been perplexing them—an elucidation Bessie had no cognizance of.

They were speaking of the name that was not Mrs. Ventress's. Miss Crome had already spread broadcast insinuation concerning cigarettes on Sunday, "that young Mr.

Breckinridge", and, as we have heard, the mysterious individual in the loud suit. The Miss Babbitts had got hold, of course, of the rumour about the name, but they were still in Philadelphia, and that had gone no farther in the town as yet. Miss Crome, seeing this, hoarded it; she enjoined Mr. Duffitt to hoard it. She said she must "turn it over in her mind". Several days of turning it over produced—A Theory.

"It's come back to me," announced Miss Crome conspiratorially one evening, in an awed voice. "It was before your time here, Mr. Duffitt. But it's come back to me!"

"What has?"

"Well, it's this way. Did you ever hear of Gertrude Gedney?"

"Yes, o'course. I know the story. She run away from home about twenty years ago, didn't she? She never turned up. Guess everyone's lived here at all knows about that."

"Yes—and——" Miss Crome rocked back and forth, her arms clasping each other in her lap. (She was a ferment of excitement within) "I've got a theory!"

"What?"

"The name comes back to me now. He was a nephew of Judge Lindon, up on the Hill——"

"Who was?"

"Roger Ventress. That was his name. I'd take my oath it was the same name. *I'd swear to it.* Besides, I've been enquiring round. There're a few still remember. Mrs. Hoyle thinks so. But Sally Barber's got the best memory in this town and has lived here the longest; only she's old and hasn't got out and around much. She says it *was* Ventress. She says she thought it was funny when this woman first came to live here. Only she doesn't talk much, does Sally. You have to get it out of her. Judge Lindon, you know, lived rather removed, up there on the Hill. Not many even of the old residents knew him, and those not well. But he had this nephew. People have forgotten. Roger Ventress came to visit his uncle—we've pieced it out, Sally and

I—and was at the Institute dance at Gertrude Gedney's Commencement. He stayed a week or so. Even Sally Barber don't remember whether they saw much of each other. But *I* remember now one evening he took her home from a young people's party. Then he went away. That would have been the end of June. About a week later Gertrude disappeared. Some connected it up then, but the idea died out. There was some talk about it—it all comes back to me—but—well, you see, this happened——”

She lifted a skinny forefinger and became impressive.

“It was what made Judge Lindon move away, and it was common talk at the time, but everybody's forgotten the name now. Roger Ventress got a heat-stroke in that hot spell in New York. The Judge left here to go to him, found him in a New York hospital where he'd been taken after he fell in the street. He lived only twenty-four hours. That much was in our local paper and you can find it there. Ventress's parents lived in New York. Judge Lindon, though, was very fond of the young man, and the end of that summer the Lindons moved away from Tupton. I'd forgotten about them for a long time. Now I remember. And Sally Barber filled out what I didn't remember——”

“But lookee here——!” exclaimed the bewildered Mr. Duffitt. “Yer past me, Miss Crome.”

“*This Mrs. Ventress*—why don't you see. She's Gertrude Gedney come back. It seems to me plain as the nose on your face. She thought, after all these years, that no one would remember. She knew the Judge's family weren't here any more. It's my belief she and that boy, Roger Ventress, got married secretly as soon as she got to the city. It's my belief she went right to New York and married him. Then he died suddenly in the street that way and she got frightened. Hid away somewhere. Afraid to go back, afraid to let on where she was. After that, I don't know.”

“But wouldn't such a marriage have come out. Don't seem reasonable, Miss Crome.”

“Why would it? If his parents had known they'd surely

have written Dr. Gedney. But I know—O I could tell!—he didn't ever hear from them or through Judge Lindon. The marriage was being kept quiet. Maybe," ventured Miss Crome recalling the movies, "maybe it was a mock-marriage."

"But why in time would she come back here with that name—specially if it weren't her own?"

"Why," asked Miss Crome dramatically, "is there sin and shame in this world?"

Mr. Duffitt didn't know the answer to that.

"It was a secret marriage," elaborated Miss Crome. "After his death she may have fallen into sin and shame. But she's come into a portion of this world's goods through it. And she's come back here to flaunt it in our faces. I don't believe there's one mite smitch of repentance in her heart. But of course she's afraid to tell who she is to her own people. She's still afraid. But—why, look at the way she's taken up with Bessie Gedney, her own sister-by-adoption. Isn't it reasonable?"

She paused dramatically.

Mr. Duffitt scratched his head. He didn't think it was. Still, the sin and shame element appealed to his highly-coloured imagination. He smoked and stared for several minutes.

"It ain't reasonable she'd a come back with that name. Besides, what about what 'Podge' said about it not bein' her rele name?"

"Well, yes, there might be a point. But I say she'd think everybody'd forgotten about that young man, it's all so long ago. I nearly had, not about the Judge, but about his nephew's name. Matter of fact, she's right. Who *has* remembered? The town's changed. All these new people—you can't keep up with them. But I think what your friend was *trying* to say was that her real name was Gedney. It is, it was, before she was married. Of that I'm sure. And she couldn't give the Ventress name up because she had a sentiment about it. She must have thought she was mightily

in love with that young man to run off to him that way. Probably she's just taken it up again lately, didn't dare use it after his death. But—everything's queer enough about her—and *I wouldn't put it past her!*"

Jason said nothing, but he shook his head several times.

"No, Miss Crome," he said. "You ain't convinced me. Her front name's this—now—A-deal-er."

"Why, but of *course* she wouldn't give herself away by using her *real* first name. She thinks we've all *forgotten*, that's the whole point. And how that pleases her!"

"Yeah, but, Miss Crome, she's met Dr. Gedney an' Mr. Pollock. She was over to his house Fourth o' July. I heard him say so."

"Once—at night—outdoors. And you know he doesn't trust her. As for Dr. Gedney, he doesn't hardly know what *Bessie* looks like, he's so absent-minded. And after *twenty* years. Why she'd have changed out of all recognition, Mr. Duffitt.

But Mr. Duffitt still demurred. He shook his head a good deal more.

"Well, all I ask you is to think it over," said Miss Sophia Crome. "There's no hurry. But listen to me. If it *is* so—and I become surer of it every minute I breathe—it's our duty, our *sacred* duty (she was positively quivering) to see that the Gedneys know. You know and I know that that woman up there is a bad influence upon this town, however you look at it. I'll bet she's led a hard life. She's no proper influence for Bessie Gedney either. With her Sunday cigarettes and her vampish ways and her strange visitors! In my opinion she's a bad influence and a bad woman. O, I know she's quiet—quiet is the worst kind. And look at her opinions—is that being an honest, God-fearing woman? No. No, Mr. Duffitt. It's our sacred duty to get this to the Gedneys. You think it over."

Mr. Duffitt did so, during the ensuing days. He came gradually to believe Miss Crome must be right. She seemed to have an answer for every objection. As for "sacred

duty",—but he was still highly nervous as to what Adela might be plotting against him in secret. "Quiet is the worst kind"! That phrase had a special meaning for him. And wasn't letting the truth get about—merely the truth, understand—an excellent way forever to forestall the chance of her telling lies about him? She'd be sure to twist it all into lies. The more he considered, in his dull, suspicious, timorous mind, the more Mr. Duffitt was convinced.

One evening, several days later, he told Miss Crome so. They discussed the best way for the news to be broken to the town. They decided to disseminate it with caution. They nobly waived the opportunity to crusade openly. They felt no fear that, in the end, the father Gertrude had abandoned so cruelly would desire her continuing presence in Tupton. The main thing was to get public opinion excited, anyway. As for Uncle Arthur, they felt quite sure of him, in his affection for Bessie and his well-known irascibility. And he was, with Dr. Gedney, such an influence.

In the meantime, two weeks passed. One day Slade 'phoned Coryat from *The Colosseum* office.

"Oh, look here; I'm going to Tupton on Friday, to begin my two weeks' vacation. It's all fixed. Want to come? Love to have you."

The answer was in the decided affirmative. But it was on Thursday that Miss Crome began her devious campaign.

She began it by treating conjecture as fact. After all, she was sure in her own mind. Why weaken the argument for truth with Possiblys and Perhapses. Also, why not tell a good story while you were about it. Therefore, in the first breathing of her belief to Mrs. Mixter she referred to a wholly reliable source of information she was in honour bound not to reveal. After all, similar references had been made by certain minor, and even major prophets of old—at least they had stated the case in a generalisation. It all depends upon one's assurance of divine afflatus. Miss Crome had ever been a crusader, though a modest one. Her picture of herself would not have been recognised as authentic, per-

haps, by the outside observer. But in her own breast, she felt positive, burned a like spiritual fire to that uplifting the hearts of saints and martyrs. The singularity of the first person, the mighty I Am and I Do, which allays all our suspicions of ourselves and routs our sudden discomfiting visions of our motives, had reached its most eccentric flowering in the mind of Saint Sophia.

A tale retold develops like a negative in a bath of acid. In the acid bath of Miss Crome's thought it developed beautifully. It assumed the sharp outlines of conviction and a thoroughly photographic realism. As her story spread it even began to convince certain men of the town. And "good ole Jase" was always nearby with sober-sided substantiation. Mr. Duffitt believed it himself, now. Miss Sally Barber, the Cumæan Sibyl of Sycamore Street, could check up on the name, even if Mrs. Harris, the Stoic, hotly pooh-poohed the whole story. Sally Barber was also, surely, a quite disinterested party, an old bed-ridden woman who had no particular axe to grind for or against anybody in Tupton. She remembered, down to exact dates, all about Roger Ventress; and on this foundation Miss Crome exercised her great natural gifts for embroidered narrative.

CHAPTER XXIV: UNCLE ARTHUR'S BOMB-SHELL

DR. GEDNEY was reading:

“——announced his hypothesis that it is an impossibility to determine by physical experiment the velocity of the earth relative to ether, moreover, that an immobile or rigid ether is unthinkable, and that there is no such thing as absolute velocity through space for any body, and that measured time and space do not exist as independent and self-contained concepts, but are always conditioned by the phenomena that they are used to describe——”

Through it he heard the gruff voice of George Syle (the only man who really interested him in Tupton) dilating upon Emmanuel Kant's antinomies, and the penalty of reality. There were always cigar ashes on Syle's vest. He never made the slightest attempt to brush them off. But then he was one of The Ten.

Dr. Gedney read:

“It is this phase of the Einstein theory that makes it expressible in terms of the fourth dimensional calculus of Minkowski wherein the distinction between time and space vanishes——”

True. What were space and time? What was anything? Nothing. He heard the wheezy spasmodic laughter of Syle as he descended suddenly to that old one—that very old one: “What is mind? No matter. What is matter? Never mind.” Syle was growing very bald, and yet his coat collar was always speckled with dandruff. That was, if not an antinomy, a paradox.

Dr. Gedney screwed up his eyes and regarded one thumb-tack of his blotter with great intensity. His book lay on his knees, between his hands that suddenly clutched and shook the covers. No way to treat a book.

He was on a long journey, a long and burning journey, through lispng wastes of sand, sand, sand.

“As an Arab journeyeth through the sands of Ayaman——”

Quotations had a way of coming into his head like that. You read and forgot. And then quotations came into your head. Like confirmations, like warnings, like prophecies.

“And no live comfort near on either hand——”

“On either hand”? That couldn’t be right. Yes. It must be. Another quotation. They had all been through it, you see. All been through it. Most, those poets.

No. They had not been through it. They only guessed. Guessed right—but only guessed. If they had known—they would not have been able to write. Would they?

Sand.

Arabs. The Arabian Nights. Burton.

His explication of native poronography. Quite horrible. Interesting. After all—we were all like that—buried. Then it shook the bars and rage. It consumed the sun.

Polygamy. Decidedly more to be said for it than—— But the Northern races *were*, after all, less occupied with these matters. Thought they were, anyway. He differed with Burton about frank nastiness being less harmful than insidious allusiveness. Depended upon your psychological makeup.

Hunger.

The mind went on. There was some salvation in the mind. Passion was a weird thing. The satisfaction of passion was a matter of so brief a period of time. Why then, when satisfaction was out of the question, did it gradually take hold of a major part of one’s mental life till it strove and raged

and wept and shook the pillars of the dusty world with furred and ape-like strength? It was unconscionable.

It was disgusting.

“—wherein the distinction between space and time vanishes. The two become complementary and inseparable and cannot exist independently——”

Dr. Gedney cleared his throat painfully,

“——and cannot exist independently any more than the two components of a force can exist by themselves. They are simply two aspects of a greater construct or entity.”

That “greater construct”? Every approach to the riddle involved merely new phrasemongering. The riddle remained. Why? Why this peculiar passion for irreconcilable mystery on the part of omnipotence? To what possible end? Evolution? People did not evolve. They stopped at a certain point and then began either to ossify or retrograde. Back to childhood. Like Jeremiah Mixter on Child Labour. Pterodactyl. What was that, said about the old Speaker of the House? “If he had been present at the Creation he would have been on the side of Chaos”? Ha!

About “as little children entering the kingdom of heaven”. . .

At the last she had looked just like a little child.

Then—so stern. Noble. Somewhere else. Removed. Alone. Forever?

Pain drove men mad. Madmen’s raving. Silence answered. Silence. Silence. Only silence. Forever?

Sphinxlike. Inscrutable. Not grief. Not happiness. Understanding. Knowing. Knowing at last.

Afternoon sunlight had touched her hair. Fixed—entirely impassive. Stillness, and flowers. The inscrutable. And yet, in life—— If it were all worth anything——

Some way—it must be.

Death, after all, was man’s one moment of real nobility. In some strange way, an accolade. To the worst as to the best. The mockery vanished. A door opened. Come. . . .

Dr. Gedney heard the voices of some children in the street,

chattering, calling. Scuff of footsteps. A whistle. "Oo-oo *Kay tee!* Oo-oo *Kaytee!*" A bar of sunlight lay across his desk. Leaves moved at the window.

"To get a clear conception of the Einstein theory of relativity we must abandon the Newtonian idea that absolute space exists and extends indefinitely in all directions and that 'absolute time flows on'. There is, moreover, no constant mass and no force acting independently of the velocity of the body upon which it acts. Changes in the shape of bodies and changes in their properties occur when changes take place in their velocities——"

Uncle Arthur would have thought "nothing of" the Einstein theory. Change had taken place in his velocity, however, though he confuted Einstein in the detail that it had not changed the shape of his body. It had certainly, however, changed the mental, physical and spiritual properties appertaining to Uncle Arthur.

He whooshed open the door of the study and stood panting upon the threshold. He clutched at his collar. He was as crimson in the face as a turkey-cock's wattles. His astigmatic eyes bulged.

Dr. Gedney's mouth was open.

"Charley!" gulped the sunset monolith, banging the door. "Wake up! For God's sake!"

"What!" Dr. Gedney sat up straight.

Uncle Arthur swayed, lowered himself into a large leather chair with a resounding thump. His arms spread in wide arcs and flopped down the sides of the chair. He "snorted like a buffalo".

Then he began staring hypnotically at his toes, his cheeks working something like a fish's gills.

Dr. Gedney peered at him. "What under heaven *is* it, Arthur. What is the matter with you?"

"I begin to doubt my sanity," rejoined Mr. Pollock in a hoarse, muffled voice. "I begin to doubt my sanity."

"Well, you certainly supply me with every reason for doubting it. Please explain yourself."

"Do not think that I have been sleeping," returned his huge connection-by-marriage with a sepulchral groan. "While others slept I have kept watch—I have kept watch!"

This seemingly irrelevant information seemed to supply a deep satisfaction in the midst of the woe apparent upon his face. "I have kept watch," he repeated.

Dr. Gedney was annoyed.

"What on earth are you talking about?"

"But you—closeted in your study—aloof from the world. However——."

"Really, Arthur, if it is impossible for you to be intelligible——"

"I can be all too intelligible," returned his brother-in-law, looking at him with a portentous frown. "I apologise for having allowed my feelings to master me. My first impulse—an overpowering one—was to cry to us all with the voice of a Stentor,—'Wake up!' But I apologise for it. I am shaken, Charley, badly shaken!"

"Yes?" returned Dr. Gedney. He glared at him. Well-meaning though he was, Arthur was so emotional, so like a bomb. Hence, probably, the word *bombastic*. In the midst of Einstein too!

Mr. Pollock passed a large sanguine-coloured handkerchief across his brow.

"I have been impetuous," he cleared his throat. "I have been impetuous, unthinking. Still, the suspicion is all over town. The occasion is grave. My feelings have mastered me."

A puzzled, pathetic expression had come upon his face, now fading from its apoplectic hue. He heaved a great sigh. He sat as one exhausted. There was no doubting the sincerity of his emotional mood. The desk clock ticked only three times before he went on.

"I have come to tell you what is being said, and to consult you. Jeremiah Mixter came to the store this morning and I talked to him in my office. He had first gone to my house. Mrs. Mixter had insisted that he speak to me. She is in-

clined to believe—— How it has all got about I do not know, nor do they. I suspect that chattering Miss Crome—that relic. But no one knows how such suspicions spread——”

“Yes, but out with it!” said Dr. Gedney sharply. “You have told me nothing yet.”

“I am coming to it. I am earnestly endeavouring to spare you, Charles. I—I—it all concerns Bessie’s friend Mrs. Ventress. She is—she is——”

“Yes, yes?”

“She is—they are all saying she is—all thinking she is—Gertrude.”

Dr. Gedney stared at him a moment in complete amazement. Then a queer twisted smile came upon his face. Not his natural smile but an indication of the sudden strain he had been under.

“Gertrude?” he said softly, incredulously, in his rustling voice. “Gertrude?”—as the significance of the name seemed for the first time to be borne in upon him. “Mrs. Ventress *Gertrude!* What supreme lunacy is this?”

“So I said at first—in my own manner. But the story has been very cleverly spread through the town. The Block is talking about it, and the newer people. I am met with commiserating glances in the stores, in my very own store—glances and remarks overheard that I was at first at a loss to understand. Something is in the air. I knew it. I felt it. Then this revelation. My emotions mastered me. I was badly shaken but I confronted Jeremiah Mixter with a face of fury——!”

“But *really*, Arthur,—I——”

“A-ah! Still you don’t see!” It could not be denied that his own rhetoric worked upon Mr. Pollock as a stimulant. He had hardly ever been able to do anything by halves. In repose he could be colloquially genial, odd but easy to get along with. Once his sentiment was touched, however, there was no telling to what lengths the emotion it engendered would carry him. Now he actually gulped and mopped his

face again. His eyes bulged as he endeavoured to speak calmly.

"We must go back, Charles,—go back to the day when I first protested to you against allowing Bessie to take drawing lessons with this—this Mrs. Ventress."

"But I fail to see——" The whole subject of discussion was becoming unreal to the Doctor. What was this utterly absurd hypothesis he was listening to?

"Yes—that has been in it. I am convinced that has been in it. And I don't know what subtle machinations that woman may have woven about her. I've always distrusted that friendship. I've endeavoured to argue with Bessie. I've endeavoured to make some impression upon your aloofness. I have listened to all the ugly rumours——"

"But it seems to me you are mixing the whole ridiculous matter up frightfully, Arthur. And just what ugly rumours?"

"Last Sunday," said Uncle Arthur weightily, "one to whom I may only refer as an Individual arrived at our town and called upon—upon Mrs. Ventress. He was there the major portion of the afternoon and stayed to supper. This they assert in various quarters. He left on the eight-ten train Sunday night. He turned out to be an old school-friend of Jason Duffitt's. Mr. Duffitt has corroborated Jeremiah Mixter's statement that the man had remarked to him personally that 'Ventress' was not this lady's real name. This individual was flashily dressed and employed by some corporation in New York. Further than this he refused to reveal his identity."

"Still,—why that is mere hearsay!"

"Hearsay it may be," returned the mountain in labour. "Hearsay it may be. But it is believed. Further than that—further than that you have been blind and deaf—yes, though I share your sense of shock and outrage (which was not so extremely apparent)—I must say it. You have been both blind and deaf, Charles, to the spread of opinion in this town against this friend of Bessie's. I repeat that I have kept

watch. I have heard again and again what was being said. I have apprised myself (Uncle Arthur paused—he could not help it—over the rotundity of the phrase), I have apprised myself of—of her reputation for secrecy and a certain—what may, I feel, only be termed—looseness of living. You are witness that I have spoken to you of this before, many times! You have seen fit in each case to pooh-pooh my warnings. I have seen Slade, our innocent nephew, becoming vitally interested in this woman. He spent the major part of Sunday afternoon in her company—smoking cigarettes——”

“I thought you just told me that this man you speak of spent ‘the major part’ (as you term it)——”

“That is neither here nor there. Slade was there for several hours——”

“Well, really, Arthur, that is no secret. Bessie told me herself she suggested his going over. As for the cigarettes——”

“But this woman was smoking with him, all afternoon. She was seen smoking with him——”

Dr. Gedney could not check an exasperated snort.

“For heaven’s sake, Arthur! I may be remote from the world’s affairs, but I do know that many women smoke, nowadays; especially in the larger cities. In England——”

“Possibly! Possibly! My views, as you know, are not governed in these matters by the opinion of the herd; but it was Sunday and Slade’s stay was long. They were seen by casual passersby sitting openly upon the front porch smoking cigarettes. They were sitting very close together. She is a much older woman. This naturally has made much disagreeable talk. There has also been a great deal of talk about her friendship with Bessie—a so much older woman. Then this—this Individual, with his mysterious information. Mrs. Ventress is known throughout the town for her pronouncedly radical opinions and she makes friends with none. True, she seemed pleasant enough and well-behaved at the fireworks—I know that is what you are opening your mouth

to say!—but remember that your instincts are blinded, often, by chivalry. I, Charles,—I am a sophisticated man of the world! You have simply no conception of the talk that has now got about. Mrs. Ventress is a common topic in the Old Residence Block, as well as among those who matter much less. I have been deeply and seriously concerned for us all. This could not well go on. Then—this visit from Jeremiah.”

He had proved a Jeremiah indeed. Uncle Arthur paused, gulping.

“Then, this visit from Jeremiah,” he went on hastily as Dr. Gedney snorted again. “This new and, to me as to you, unbelievable tale concerning the identity of this—Mrs. Ventress—with one, who, in spite of—who, in spite of,—whose memory will—what ever fools may think—always be dear to us all—I——!”

The trumpet sang truce in the shape of Uncle Arthur’s handkerchief applied to his nose. He shook his head violently and stamped one foot upon the floor. By an equally violent effort he remained in his chair, tapping his foot and clenching and unclenching his big fists upon his knees.

“Moreover,” he suddenly bawled (that is the only term for it). “Moreover—when has she ever mentioned her husband—tell me that! When has she ever explained the absence of her husband? They are saying that—that—”

“Come, come, Arthur. I am not deaf, you know! This all sounds to me like the most unutterable—— What *are* they saying then?”

“It goes back even farther. Do not think that I wish to recall a sorrow past and gone——.”

His brother-in-law certainly did exasperate Dr. Gedney. As if the past had not gone permanently and indelibly deeper with him than it could ever by any possibility have gone with Arthur. Arthur knew practically nothing—substantially nothing at all—how could he ever possibly know?

“Go on!” Dr. Gedney’s voice was very dry.

“This then. Do you remember a young man years ago,

a distant relative, a protégé of Judge Lindon's, who came to this town for a week or so, about the time of—about the time of—well, of that Commencement at the Institute years ago. He called here once—did he not?—on Gertrude——”

“A young man? There were several young men. I don't recall—— O, why, I believe I do recall that there was some nephew of Judge Lindon's Gertrude once spoke of, but only casually——”

“Do you remember his name?”

“I do not. Let me see. Something is coming back though. Surely it was that nephew of Judge Lindon's who met with an accident or something in New York. The Judge went on to see him. He died in hospital there. That precipitated the Lindons' moving away. But I don't recall the name.”

“Exactly. He was prostrated in the heat wave in New York in the summer of 1900. The Lindons left here that fall. I had completely forgotten the whole matter. In fact, it seems that hardly anyone remembers the nephew except Miss Barber on Sycamore Street. That old woman remembers everything about this town. Ain't it strange that you—who are writing a history——”

“But what *are* you driving at? I see no possible connection.”

“You don't? Simply this. It is now asseverated that the young man's name was Ventress, that—I must speak openly, Charles; it is not that I desire any more than you to revive the past—that Gertrude and he had some sort of an understanding, that she joined him in New York, married him, and then, after his sudden accident and death, in panic disappeared again, neither desiring to come in contact with his parents or Judge Lindon or have us know anything about it. They are sure it was a secret marriage. But all that we might pass by. However—it is asserted—that now, after years of obscurity, she has come again to Tupton—the name being the same——”

“*Who made up this vicious cock-and-bull story? Who concocted this cruel lie?*”

Dr. Gedney's eyes were blazing. His hand shook upon the table. For the first time that afternoon he was thoroughly roused. Uncle Arthur stared at him with an expression of Gargantuan alarm. Dr. Gedney had risen and stood erect by his desk, gripping the chair-back till his knuckles whitened.

"Of all the preposterous gossip I ever heard! Of all the malicious lies! I—! No. No. I can talk perfectly calmly. I *will*." He sat down again.

"Now listen to *me*, Arthur. It is time that you listened to *me*!"

He spoke again in a calm dry voice, sitting slimly upright; and, for all his bulk, the large figure opposite looked lugubriously pathetic beside him.

"I shall tell you something I have never told a living soul. But before I begin, may I point out a palpable inconsistency in your emotional point of view. If Mrs. Ventress *were Gertrude*—which she is not—I should not tolerate for one instant your suspicions against her or your criticisms of her. As it is, I think you have been badly misled by entirely distorted rumours. Some of your charges seem to me utterly absurd.

"Now, I shall tell you—something.

"I heard from Gertrude in the month after her mother's death. For reasons sufficient to myself, and because no other human being has any right to intrude upon my feelings in this matter, most of what was written in that letter shall remain sealed. But in it she said that, though unhappy, she had made a new life for herself and wished to work out her own destiny. We need not go in to her self-reproaches or her natural grief. That chapter is closed. She would come back to me, she said, if I needed her. She described her circumstances at that time. She was the secretary-companion to a rich woman travelling in England. She was doing some writing under another name. Naturally she had not retained the name of Gedney either. But she told me the address of a friend in London to whom I might write her

under her real name. She did not tell me the name she had now assumed.

"I spent days thinking it over. I saw that her real happiness must lie in her chosen work. She knew about Bessie and wanted to help me with Bessie. But I could take care of Bessie and I tried to look ahead. If Gertrude returned here she would have our love and our protection. On the other hand she was now earning her own living and if she returned to Tupton she would—well, you have seen what this town is for gossip, you must see what the atmosphere outside of our own home would have been for her. She was evidently in a good position and in a livelier, more interesting atmosphere. I wrote immediately after I had come to my decision. I assured her both of my forgiveness and my love, of my most earnest wish to have her call upon me at any time when things went wrong, when she was in the slightest trouble or perplexity. I told her to return whenever she had need of us. Meanwhile I tried to take an understanding point of view toward her work. I received a most lovely letter in reply, thanking me—and, well, you know Gertrude—my Gertrude. She assured me that she was all right, that they would probably be indefinitely in England; that she would come home at the first opportunity when they returned. Since then I have received two letters a year regularly, one upon my birthday in April, one on Christmas day. They have been continually cheerful. Continually brave. She was this lady's companion for ten years, during the War she held a British Government position, she has never been very specific, but I have been able to follow her in general through her life. I have guarded this matter of her letters with the most extreme care. I have guarded it even from Bessie. I took the precaution of taking a lock-box, through a friend, in the large Post Office at Barrack Falls and instructed Gertrude to address me there. I see now that I have been too secret. Perhaps this thing has now come upon me because I have been too secret. Well, my only excuse must be, that it all has gone too deep. Martha

never referred again to Gertrude while she lived. Her attitude drove me in upon myself. After her death, for a long time, there were things we could not speak about—even you and I. My pride——” Dr. Gedney looked stonily ahead of him. “Well, so it is anyway. So it has been. Bessie has sometimes been curious. I have always tried to assure her of my belief in Gertrude’s happiness though I could not give her exact reasons. Lately I have several times intended to tell her the whole truth, especially since Gertrude’s last letter to me in—last April. It was a buoyant letter. It cheered me very much. She said she had money, friends, easy employment and a fine outlook. She has never exactly specified, gone into details, but I could see that everything was well with her.

“But now—knowing all this—and knowing her nature—do you see what a farrago of utter nonsense this is that you have brought to me. As for Mrs. Ventress——”

Uncle Arthur was silent. He had been staring at his brother-in-law without the ability to speak. He opened and shut his mouth. Finally he brought out,

“Well—well—well, but Charley——”

“Yes?” enunciated Dr. Gedney crisply.

“This is an *utter* revelation, of course,—an *utter* revelation. And I do not understand why you—— But Charley. But Mrs. Ventress too, Bessie says, has been a writer——?”

“Arthur! How can you be so purblind. In the first place, even after all these years, to think that I would not recognise my own daughter! And is it conceivable that Gertrude would return to Tupton, after what I have told you, bearing the name of this man she is supposed to have married——”

“Has she ever married?”

“To judge from her letters, never.”

“She never said anything?”

“About this Ventress, you mean? Nothing.”

“Well——!”

“Why,—would she make this friendship with Bessie under my very eyes, when she loves me? Why, Arthur, we have

both seen her. Would I——” Do what he could his voice trembled slightly. “Is it conceivable that I would not recognise her? I looked at Mrs. Ventress that evening most particularly——.”

“O,” he suddenly cried, rising abruptly, “this is vicious, positively *vicious*! Whoever has fomented these lies, these utter lies! It is the one way they could have stabbed me. How they must hate me!”

Uncle Arthur was more than dismayed. As his brother-in-law’s burning eyes looked into his he saw that they glittered with tears. He felt utterly unequal to the situation. He suddenly wished that he had never been born. He never would have thought—that Charley—— He never remembered, since Martha’s death, having felt such a miserable intruder.

“Who Mrs. Ventress really is,” Dr. Gedney went on, resuming control of his voice, “I have not the slightest idea. If it is not her real name, there is something we must find out. My own opinion is that all these rumours are of a piece, a tissue of lies. Vicious scandal spread by half-witted busybodies. I have trusted Bessie’s instinct throughout and I will most certainly not distrust it now till we have more to go on. I can still see nothing whatever *prima facie* against Mrs. Ventress. No, we do not know who her husband is, nor whether she is divorced or widowed. From what I have heard I gathered they had separated. I trust Slade’s instinct also.

“To return to—to Gertrude. It is just barely possible that, after a strange life, if it had been unhappy, we would not immediately recognise her. We have only seen her once. It is barely possible; but to me it is thoroughly impossible that I would not have known that night. But to even imagine that Gertrude—I refuse to retain for an instant any such nauseating suspicions. As for this trumped-up story, it is thoroughly malicious——”

“We must immediately confront the perpetrators and disperse it then,” cried Uncle Arthur, lumbering up.

"No! No, I tell you. I will not have Gertrude's name bandied about this town. Let it die, in our scorn. Lies die of themselves."

"But you have no conception of how far it has spread!"

"Arthur! My daughter's life is her own. To refute these absurd allegations I should have to speak of her letters. That I will *never* do. I have asked little of life. There is one thing I intend to keep. I intend to keep the love between my daughter and myself sacred. That is the very little to which I claim the right, but I claim it absolutely. If you ever so much as mention——"

Uncle Arthur's face wavered mountainously. The scar burned on his face. He could only make vague elephantine gestures.

"But we must find some way. This situation is perfectly intolerable!"

"Yes. I agree. We must find some way. But not through a secret which is mine and mine only. I will never——"

"No. No. I know, Charles. But I intend to——"

"Arthur, if you arrive at any plan I exact your promise that you will do or say nothing without first consulting me!"

"All right. But I intend to find out——"

"Arthur! You know that your emotions easily run away with you—that you are hasty and impulsive——"

"I know—I know—O great Xerxes—but this is utterly intolerable. I mean to find out. I—I mean to go and see Mrs. Ventress! I mean to find out who she really is!"

CHAPTER XXV: CORYAT IS INOPPORTUNE

SHE lay lazily watching the gilding sunlight. The white curtains across the room below the foot of her bed waved idly. She heard Marie moving about upstairs. It must be very early.

Yes, she had found a certain peace of mind here, time to think it all over. People, of course, had intruded. People always intruded. She was aware that she had not put herself out for them, that she had withdrawn. But that was a necessity of this interim of her life.

She had done one good piece of work at least. That was an idea, to try it on some good magazine without letting them be in the slightest degree aware of who really had written it. . . .

From consideration of which her mind turned to marveling at his audacity and pertinacity. To have ferreted out her whereabouts and followed her. . . .

And she could see, lately, that Bessie had been wondering more and more. She couldn't keep it up much longer. She certainly had not planned a masquerade that might turn cruel. No, that would have been too cruel. And she had been careful about questioning Bessie, particularly careful and tactful. She hoped she would be able to do things for Bessie some day. She had already done something.

But once people knew, there would be no escape. How it clung to one. And they were bound to find out. It was remarkable that they had not done so before this. It had been an entirely impulsive and sentimental mistake to come here. It had been a mistake to want to see them all. And probably it *had* been cruel, even though they did not know. Sometimes she didn't have the sense she was born with!

And now it was Slade who was getting too interested. That must be stopped; that must always be stopped. In Slade's case—Slade and Bessie. That *must* be arranged. At all events she, Adela, had escaped that other "interested party". . . .

People probably thought hers was a cold nature. If they only knew! After the smash-up of her marriage, if Ethel Aspern hadn't had this brother. . . .

Idyllic was the word. Perhaps it was better that way, now that the most frantic pain was over forever, pain that had driven her more savagely to work, work, work, while breath was in her. Just blind work at first, and work for so long, and work—she had come to see—that amounted to so little. And then that desperate feeling that she *must* accomplish in the eyes of the world. How he had helped during the mere half-successes, with a perfectly rational but beautiful idealism. After he—well, after he went away—(after all what compulsion was there upon her to say he had—died, when she couldn't bear it?)—then, in her pain, in her almost frenzy, she had laid the ideals away, with the thoughts of him, in that secret place. It couldn't be work like that any more. That had been what it was going to be, when—when—— No, it must be something hard, strange, disagreeable at first, with the tang of bitterness of spirit in it. That had been the mistake, the way she had taken, at first in thorough irony; the wrong turning. Then—— then, accepting, it had grown easy; Nirvana, the narcotic. And gradually the insidious change in her own point of view. If she could have kept her original attitude toward it, but "we first endure, then pity, then embrace." She smiled twistedly as the quotation crossed her mind. Vice. Well if it *had* been *true* vice it might even have been better, in a way.

But now it would cling to her forever. No, she *could* not confess!

Help and affection from the only one in her family that she loved, and money, had been there if she wished to call

upon him for them. Well, she had kept up the affectionate bond in letters, occasional letters, but she had had her pride too. That had been one reason, she had *had* to make good—to repay people—people who had trusted her.

Well, this one thing *was* good—this secret of her recent absence from Tupton. No one had known her. She had left it. It *was* good. . . .

If he had only lived . . . But now it *was* the right track. She had come nearer to him than for a long while . . . She *would* put it through!

It was going to be a hot day. She would do a few errands on Market Street, after breakfast, before it got too hot. . . .

Dinah White was the first encounter. She met Dinah and the cat Jezebel as she was closing her front gate. Dinah rolled her eyes at her. She sputtered over her answer to Adela's smiling "good morning!" She kept looking at Mrs. Ventress curiously. It was odd in Dinah. It continued to puzzle Adela as she turned down the Farm Road.

She nearly ran into Jason Duffitt at the corner of the Farm Road and Market Street. She was satisfied to see his colour intensify and to hear him mutter something, with head averted, as he hurried away. He seemed in a great hurry. She had looked straight at him but had not inclined her head. It was their first encounter since the occasion of his conduct.

In the drug-store two of the Other Half Rome, in striped sport skirts and georgette blouses, were giggling and gossiping with Jimmy Hale, the clerk, over foamy and sickly-tinted ice-cream sodas. They stared at Adela's entrance. They began talking very low to each other and more than once exploded in a muffled laugh. Then they were very grave again.

"Good morning!" said Adela pleasantly to young Hale. He nodded, and answered her, but flushed a little. He looked somewhat sheepish. He attended to her purchase in silence. The two girls followed her about the store with

their eyes in the mirror behind the soda-fountain. She caught them doing it. Not since the first few days of her arrival in Tupton had so much interest been publicly evinced.

Mrs. Mixter was in the grocery. She hurried out to her waiting car. She overlooked seeing Adela. Heads and glances were turned away as Mrs. Ventress looked around. It was confusing and a little frightening. Could it be? Yes, of course, that was it. They had found out. But *really*—after all——

She could not keep the colour from coming into her face, though she felt it pale again almost immediately. Well, what of it. Her eyes narrowed. She met the nearest person's gaze with a cold, abstract, measuring glance. It happened, however, to be Rebecca Stone, who immediately came over and spoke to her. As Rebecca seemed natural enough, Adela's heart softened. But she did not understand. Why did they all seem so avoiding—except Rebecca? That was the peculiar part of it. You would have thought——

Rebecca seemed to be speaking needlessly loud, too. She had an attitude of defiance about something. There was more to this. What on earth was it? General Brattle entered the store with a market-basket, shopping for his wife.

Adela took her package from the grocer who gazed at her curiously. There was a smiling droop to one corner of his mouth. He acted as if he were in a secret.

Suddenly Mrs. Ventress was overcome by a positive wave of shyness. She turned to get out—get out of that store and get home. Even if they *had* found out, there was something about it she couldn't understand. Of course, she might have known it would come out; still—— Maybe they suspected all sorts of things just because—— Oh, that was it, was it? She suddenly met the eyes of General Brattle.

He gave a very low bow. He turned away. He began talking loudly to the clerk.

Adela paused an instant. Then she was in the street. Rebecca was still beside her. Adela looked at her with

parted lips and wide open eyes. "Tell me what it is, Rebecca?" she asked simply.

"What? Why, there's nothing——"

"Don't be silly with me," returned Adela sharply. "Tell me."

"It's just their idiocy," burst out Rebecca. "I don't believe it, myself. Don't think *I* believe it."

"But what *is* it? I must know. Is it what *I* think it is? Do they think (she hedged. Perhaps it wasn't, and there was no use giving it away, if not.), do they think I am——"

Rebecca looked at her with dawning wonder. Her expression slowly assumed the tragic. She began a nod like that of a tranced automaton.

At this moment a familiar voice behind Mrs. Ventress said "Good morning!" It was Slade.

Adela turned to him with a rather bewildered expression, but his face reassured her. It was smiling and natural.

"Fine morning, isn't it?"

"Oh, how do you do. I didn't know you had returned."

"Came down for my holiday—and, by the way, I've brought a friend." Slade smiled with teasing in his eyes. "Someone you know *of*, at least. Here he is," as a figure approached from the drug-store, a straw-hatted figure. Mrs. Ventress gazed dumbly.

"Mrs. Ventress, this is Mr. Coryat."

She had tried to say *something*. Richard Coryat stood holding his straw hat at a stiffly frozen angle of fifty-five degrees. His mouth, I regret to say, was open.

Slade looked puzzledly from one to the other.

"Uh—uh—why, how d'ye do!" emitted Coryat like a clock-work doll. His mouth began twitching.

"How do you do, Mr. Coryat," Adela had recovered her voice and held his eye. He read hers unmistakably.

"I believe you people *do* know each other," blurted Slade with an embarrassed laugh.

"Very slightly," returned Coryat, all *politesse* but still a

trifle glassy. "I *have* had the pleasure of meeting Mrs.—er—Ventress before."

"Yes, I quite recall it now," said Adela hurriedly. She began to rattle on about something, about New York and mutual acquaintances, all the while aware that General Brattle had paused not two feet off, overhearing the entire introduction, and that Rebecca Stone had slipped away to the other side of the street and was walking slowly down it, head bent in thought.

Several passersby, who seemed mere peering phantoms to Adela, stared at the three now turning into the Farm Road. Slade walked on her left, Coryat on her right. She was perfectly furious with Richard Coryat.

A graven calm came upon her. She felt as though she could exchange conspicuously inane remarks forever. She was aware that she was talking rapidly and not particularly well. If a bolt of lightning had at that moment reduced Richard Coryat to ashes she would only have raised a wild, hysterical shout of joy. Could it have been through him that the town knew—

As she glanced at him balefully through the formal courtesy of her last remark, she noted that he looked comparatively well and cheerful. It was an insult that he should look so cheerful. Then she caught him covertly smiling. Rage seethed within her.

It was too much altogether. What was the matter with this morning? It had become a thoroughly perplexing unreality. The distance to her gate which now flashed into her mind like an arbour entrance to Paradise, seemed enormous. Her suede shoes were dusty. She had forgotten to raise her parasol. She glanced at Slade and caught him looking at her with bewilderment. Why *should* he be bewildered? What casual, clumsy infants men were! She hated him too. She loathed both her escorts suddenly with all the intensity of her sex.

She was finally nodding and smiling to them at her gate. She was answering their request to call with an acquiescence

she immediately regretted. Again she fixed her eyes on Coryat's face.

They were going down the road toward Poplar Street. Thank Heaven!

She was lying back in the Chinese wicker chair, fanning herself with her handkerchief. But if her secret were discovered anyway—— But *was* it discovered? The whole morning had dismayed her. It had done something queer to her nerves. What was it? Did they know, those people? But they had behaved so queerly! Even if they did—— What on earth *else* did they know? What *did* they imagine?

CHAPTER XXVI: A FERMENT OF MINDS

SLADE was silent for a moment, as they walked on. "Well, now you've seen her—and I see you know her—do you think——?"

"Oh, no!" returned Coryat. "I had no idea——"

"I didn't know——!" he said again.

"But you do know her?"

"Why—uh—yes—I—uh—I've met her before. I—uh—didn't quite remember——"

Slade did not speak his thought. He said:

"Isn't she delightful?"

"Yes—uh—charming."

As Slade turned his own eyes away Coryat's side-glance examined him.

"I suppose," said Slade, "that was why you thought you remembered the name?"

"Yes—I suppose,—no, you see I—I had only met her very casually."

Slade knew *that* was a lie.

A black cloud unaccountably filled his mind. There was something wrong about the whole business. There was something wrong about the silence and slight references to Mrs. Ventress on the part of both his Uncle Charles and Bessie at breakfast that morning. Both, it had been plain, were worried about something. But neither one, on the other hand, seemed to be in the other's confidence. He caught each glancing at the other when the other was pre-occupied. As for Coryat, he was turning over in his mind the cryptic conversation he had overheard in the drugstore.

"Aw," said the soda clerk to the Other Half Rome. "Aw, I really don't believe that. It stands to reason——."

"That's what they're *all* saying," said the girl with the bronze hair and orange hair-ribbon. "But, good grief, they *do* believe it. They're talkin' about nothing else. It seems she ran away with this feller——."

"And she'd be libel to come back here with the same name," retorted the clerk, dipping glasses, his bare brown arms plunged beneath the counter. It was satire.

"Well, I don't know about that," retorted the bronze-haired girl, swinging herself on her high stool by means of a supporting hand against the marble slab. "She wanted to give 'em the once-over. She's rich now, ain't she?"

"'Scuse me, Maybelle, yer crazy. She wouldn't be that kind."

"Well, *buh-lieve me*, now, I've heard things about this Mrs. *Ventress* might prove she was *any* kind. I heard——"

But just what Maybelle had heard was interrupted by Coryat's request for shaving-cream.

"I b'lieve she's this Gedney girl," he heard Maybelle's partner say, as he went out through the door. What on earth had she meant by that? What was it all about?

Slade had heard nothing that morning. He had entered no stores, and people always glanced at him curiously anyway, his visits being rare in Tupton.

The minds of all of them were well enough occupied that Saturday, the first of August.

So it was she! Coryat thought. But now of course his wild surmise was proved utterly absurd. Well, he would preserve her secret. Yet, despite his best efforts, a small suspicion persisted in whispering. It was all so very peculiar.

The more Slade thought, the less he understood it. That other man. Now Coryat. Was Coryat—— Was she——? Coryat's search. *Had* she a husband? He must know, he must know definitely.

The more Bessie thought, the less she made of certain insinuations she had heard in the town. She only knew now that Ventress was not Adela's real name. For Slade, if not

for herself,—though this was merely the pride of the martyr—she must know.

The more Dr. Gedney thought, the less he knew how to deal with the situation. Arthur was certain to do something rash. Make it worse. There was no one less the silent sleuth than Arthur. How had the absurd rigmarole started?

As for Uncle Arthur, he paced up and down, up and down his cool parlour full of cases of stuffed birds and cabinets of silicates, with grim lips tightened about his cigar. His crooked teeth macerated it. His nimbus of hair stood out every which way from his head. He stumped stertorously. He was almost as cross-eyed as Ben Turpin with the effort to think straight.

Meanwhile the town mumbled and murmured. Three-fourths of it was sure on insufficient evidence that the Gedney girl had come home. Mankind is an ingrained myth-maker.

The young people went for a walk in the afternoon, not in the direction of Mrs. Ventress's,—if indeed we can include Coryat in the term "young people". Dr. Gedney spent the afternoon in his study and garden, trying to make up his mind to go over and see Mrs. Ventress himself. He did not want to see her.

Miss Crome was satisfied. She sat in her parlour like the famous arachnid of nursery-rhyme. She fanned herself with a palm-leaf fan and waited the event.

Jason Duffitt was not satisfied. Too many were talking. Miss Crome had been too hasty. He did not see the end. He did not know exactly what he feared, but he feared.

It was very hot in the afternoon train that rumbled into Tupton at three o'clock. The few arrivals were weary and perspiring. The desk-clerk in the Conestoga House was somnolent. He sat drowsing in a chair whose straw bottom was broken and filled with old rubbed newspapers. His feet were elevated to the ledge of the window. He finally responded to the woman who rapped on the desk. She looked shabby and weary from the train. She wanted a room.

He drawled out information about rooms. An equally somnolent negro in a faded, stained blue uniform whose jacket was open revealing a soiled and collarless shirt, leaned heavily on the wire cable of the most ancient type of elevator, which creaked and trembled in revolt, with the utmost deliberation, up to the next floor. The hall was thick-carpeted with dusty and spotted crimson, even in this weather. Silent as the grave. Down it they padded to a slatted door. The negro clicked a large nickel-plated key in a scratched lock and left the lady to the mercies of a broad, flimsily-curtained window looking out on a drowsy dusty street wherein the only object of interest was an aged horse in a fly-net, hitched to a sagging surrey. The horse switched a discouraged tail across bony flanks.

There were four articles of furniture in the room, gleaming with cracked white paint. Viz: One large double bed, one bureau, one tin wash-stand holding a white china basin and pitcher figured with forget-me-nots, and one rocking-chair with a bumper of stuffed lace tied to the top of its back by soiled baby-blue ribbon. The Conestoga House had once been the pride of the Valley.

The recent arrival sighed briefly. She was very tired. She removed shirtwaist and skirt and bathed her face, neck and arms with water from the china pitcher. She loosened her hair. She had already drawn down the wrinkled green blind, a spiderweb of white cracks. She lay down upon the stuffy bed with the spread drawn over her knees. Her eyes pricked with dust. The room was too hot and the sunlight streamed past the edges of the blind in dusty bars. The arrival lay staring. She would close her eyes only for fugitive moments. Her white face lay immobile in the dark pool of her hair. She was trying to rest. She felt utterly exhausted.

* * *

After supper Coryat explained to Slade that he thought he ought to step over and just speak to Adela—a polite call. Of course, in the Terrill matter, there was nothing to find

out. He thought he manœuvred well. Slade, however, on his part, disdained to show that he had any interest in whether Coryat went over there or went to Jericho. He said, "Why, certainly, why don't you?" with a smile. But his heart beat.

He knew now once and for all, of course, that she didn't care a bean for him. He had seen it in her coldness to him that morning. He had his pride. He would always, of course, distantly adore her. Which attitude would certainly have made Adela contrite, had she realised it, but she also would have heaved a sigh of relief.

There was a good deal of childishness still in Slade.

Doctor Gedney said nothing when he heard that Coryat was going. He would go alone, when *he* went. He went into his study.

"How about a walk, Bess?" asked Slade. "It's rather cooler this evening."

CHAPTER XXVII: THE MISOGYNIST CALLS

CORYAT sat with Adela in the chequer of vineleaf shadows. Beyond the porch the fireflies winked incessantly.

"It has seemed a long time to me," he said gravely. "How have you been?"

"I thought I could find myself," she replied. "I think I have made a start."

He was silent.

"Something you've written?" he asked then.

"Yes, something I've written."

"Good. By the way, I suppose you haven't heard about the claimant to authorship of 'The Crystal Castle'—you remember, that story Slade tells me he told you about, that came into *The Colosseum* anonymously?"

"Why, no!" Adela turned toward him sharply. The next instant she sat upright in her long chair. A large figure had mounted the porch steps and stood bulking out some of the moonlight.

"Mrs. Ventress?" a deep voice said courteously. "I am Mr. Pollock. Oh, pardon me, I didn't see——" He referred to Richard.

"Oh, Mr. Coryat?" he said peering closer. "I—I met you this morning. You—er—a fine night isn't it?"

"Yes," returned Coryat, who had risen. "Er—Mrs. Ventress turns out to be an old acquaintance. We were——"

"An old acquaintance—mm—indeed," said Uncle Arthur. "But I was just passing. I merely—I will go along."

"Oh," said Adela, wondering, wondering. "Won't you sit down?"

"Thank you, Mrs.—er—Ventress, the—uh—the fact is—well——"

"But perhaps I am in the way?" suggested Coryat quickly. "I—suppose I——"

"Oh, no, no indeed, not at all,—I was just passing by. I——" He seemed inscrutably vague.

"If there is anything particular," offered Adela, "Mr. Coryat will, I'm sure, excuse us a few moments. I wanted you to look at my garden anyway Mr. Coryat. It's rather pretty by moonlight."

This last was said as he stood on the steps. Taking her hint he descended. It left Uncle Arthur decidedly uncomfortable, but he lowered himself into a porch chair with something like a groan. There seemed to be nothing else to do.

"I—uh—really," he began. "It is—uh—I don't know exactly." He produced the ever-present handkerchief and applied it to his face.

"I can help you, perhaps," said Adela in a low tone. Her nerves had been enough played upon this day. She was almost at the end of her patience.

"Don't think I am unaware," she hurried on tensely, "of the gossip that has recently centred around my name in this town, for very little reason, I must say. But in coming here I suppose I let myself in for it. But I see your point before you have made it, Mr. Pollock. It is doing Bessie harm, whom I know you love, and our friendship must stop. That is what you have come to say. Well, I will spare you the trouble. Since my name is assumed——"

"Assumed?" gasped Uncle Arthur. "Then you admit it?" He was leaning forward, trying to see her face.

"Why, certainly. I know now you all know it."

"Assumed?" mumbled Uncle Arthur, groping. "But then—you are—but who are you then?"

"Do you mean to say," returned Mrs. Ventress with some asperity, for her nerves had been sorely tried by the day's

experience, "do you mean to tell me that you don't *really* know?"

She saw Uncle Arthur's face actually pale in the moonlight.

"You will pardon me—ah—er—but I have been seriously wrought up—seriously wrought up. I——"

His voice gave a queer quaver. He stopped and mopped his brow. His staring eyes never left her face. She was sorry for him.

"Are you then? Can it be——? But it is all so—so extremely difficult to say——"

Again he paused.

"But what is it, Mr. Pollock? You alarm me."

She was also bending forward, her eyes wide as she looked at him.

He gathered all his resources. He made the porch chair tremble with his agitation. He evidently braced himself. Then the question burst from him:

"*Are you Gertrude?*"

"What—*what*—you mean you have thought—that *they* have thought——"

"No one would have thought it, but there has been an insidious scandal spread by malicious miscreants. They have spread the rumour that you—— But you seem to have expected—to have known——!"

"Well, naturally, Mr. Pollock, I have known of—of your niece, through Bessie. Naturally I have thought it all over. But how *can* you have suspected——! How could it possibly be that I——"

"Then why is your name 'Mrs. Ventress'?" asked Uncle Arthur, point-blank.

"But my name is not Gertrude!"

"No, but it is Mrs. Ventress."

"Why—why, now you ask me, I'm sure I don't know. I mean, I told you it was an assumed name. Quite assumed. It just came into my head. And what has 'Ventress' to do with it?"

"Mrs.—if you are or are not—Mrs. Ventress," rejoined Uncle Arthur heavily, "I have paced my bedroom by night striving to solve this ghastly mystery. I have laboured under a heavy weight of thought. I have delved in our public archives" (he meant, as a matter of fact, that he had visited the Tupton Memorial Library for back files of the old *Tupton Crier*). "It stands in black and white upon this public print that a Roger Ventress was present in this town in late June, 1900——" He drew from his pocket a slim yellowed newspaper and slapped his knee with it. Flakes of yellow drifted from it.

"I purloined this document from the files. Deny the name, if you can!"

Adela rose somehow and took the paper from him. She stood by the porch pillar. She read the item signifying that "Mr. Roger Ventress, nephew of Judge Lindon, is now in our midst, visiting his uncle upon the Hill. Mr. Ventress comes from New York, where he is highly esteemed in the brokerage business."

"That is extremely strange," admitted Adela. "But still, I don't see——" She held the paper out to him.

The mountain looked upon her. Suddenly it arose and came close to her, searching her face with astigmatic eyes.

"God help me, *I* would not know," it avouched dramatically, and again subsided slowly into a chair.

"Do you actually mean to say, Mr. Pollock," said Adela slowly, "that you *doubt* whether I am Gertrude Gedney or not? Oh, I see, now," she added. "*That* was what they were believing down-town to-day. *That* was it!"

"If you are not, Mrs. Ventress, you will, I feel sure, explain why you took the name——"

"But I don't see," returned Adela, passing a hand over her forehead. "Still I don't see what connection this man had——"

"*I* say, none whatever," exclaimed Uncle Arthur suddenly from the gloom. It was rather frightening. "*I* say, none whatever, and that it is a horrible and malicious slander

upon the—upon—— But there *is* this suspicion, spread by God knows what abominable miscreants.”

“I see,” murmured Mrs. Ventress. Her imagination hovered.

Suddenly a feeling of shame overcame her. *Why* had she come here? Why had she followed her impulse? How she had managed to hurt them all, somehow,—even Bessie, Bessie, of whom she was so genuinely fond. How *could* she ever really explain? It would seem to them, wouldn’t it, like such witless cruelty?

She stood silent.

“Mr. Pollock,” she cried then impulsively. “Won’t you believe that I am telling you the truth, even if I can’t tell you the whole truth. Won’t you believe that I am not—not your niece. I am not. And I will explain. But—but I can’t just yet. Won’t you trust me?”

“If I could understand that name——” Uncle Arthur muttered in the shadow. “If I could understand that name——”

“But I don’t know *where* I got it!” cried Adela agitatedly.

Coryat’s figure glimmered out of the garden. He came up to the steps. The raised voices had made him return.

“Mr. Coryat,” she turned to him on impulse. “*Please* come up here. *You* know who I am. Tell him! Tell him the truth!”

It was absurd and impossible to hope to keep that a secret any longer.

CHAPTER XXVIII: A REVELATION AND A RESCUE

BESSIE and Slade had accompanied Coryat to Mrs. Ventress's gate, passing on. They had turned down the Farm Road. They walked in silence, each with their own thoughts.

"I don't care," Bessie was saying to herself. "I don't care. I know she's true blue. And I don't care about Slade either," she added to herself, hardly realising it. She ought to speak to him about it, she supposed. She supposed she ought not to have told him to go over and see Adela that afternoon. She knew that Fourth of July evening that he had fallen in love with Adela. She ought to have reminded him that perhaps, after all, Adela was still married. But how could you? And the way she herself felt about Adela. You couldn't, that was all.

Maybe others would have, maybe others could have questioned Adela, advised Slade. How could *she*, so much younger? If they *were* separated—then it would be all right, maybe, eventually——. She didn't know. She didn't know how *anything* would come out. How could she? People had their own lives to live, didn't they? It wasn't so impossible, if two people loved each other. Did Adela love him? She didn't believe so. But she might. Who wouldn't! Still. *Was* it her responsibility to speak to him, about this rumour? She couldn't. Why was it? Maybe she could tell Slade so that he would trust Adela as she, Bessie, trusted her. . . .

Slade was thinking: What *are* they talking about now? Of *course* she didn't write it. Well, why is he so mysterious about her? Why do they, somehow, seem so intimate? It

must be she he had been trying to find. You could see how well they knew each other. He just pretended to think she might have written the story in order to make an excuse to come down here. He didn't want her to think he was running after her, but he wants to make up. Oh, no, maybe that's all rot. Still. Well, what did it matter. But maybe she had changed her name. That was it, that was why it had startled him when he heard it. She had got it out of something in their past—Ventress. And he hadn't forgotten altogether. They had separated, and she changed her name, and he was hunting for her. That *must* be it! (Slade's imagination was burning.) It was clear, clear as day! Well, after all, one couldn't help liking him, and, somehow, adoring her. *Fini*, though. Oh, well, oh, well!

"Slade," said Bessie, "I don't want you to think what I am going to tell you changes my opinion of Adela one particle or alters one particle my love for her. But I just want to tell you that Ventress, they are saying,—not that it's necessarily true at all—isn't her real name. I thought I ought to tell you—but I don't want you to think——"

Of course, it wasn't. Confirmation.

"I knew it," said Slade. "Or rather, I guessed it."

"You *did*? How?"

"Why because I think,—no, now I know——"

Suddenly he found himself telling her the thoughts his mind had just traversed, the exact thoughts. Then, as some elaboration was demanded, he recounted to her the main points of his conversations with Coryat. Meanwhile they had crossed Market Street, they had lingered along Larch to Laurel. They turned south on Laurel along the silent moonlit road. Bessie was listening intently. When he finished there was a silence.

Then, "I'm very sorry if that's true, because I know," she said in a low voice.

"Know what? What do you mean Bess?"

"That you're in love with her."

Softly as they had been spoken the words rang in Slade's

ears. And the ringing of them raised a sudden question he had never expected.

The slim figure beside him continued to move on silently. Then Bessie stopped and turned her full face toward him.

"Aren't you?" she asked honestly.

She asked that.

He looked at her. Why had they grown so grave, so much older with each other lately? He looked at her. His eyes could not leave her face.

"I—I admire Mrs. Ventress very much. I—I adore her in a certain way. She—doesn't care one particle for me. You know that."

Was it he, standing there, awkwardly stirring the white dust with his shoe, almost like a school-boy? Was it Bessie? She stood gracefully, her head bent toward him, dark and somehow burning, her face a moonlit pallor under her dark straying hair, against the hedge brightened to a theatrical green by the arc-light on its high pole, sizzling beyond them.

Who were these people?

People who had come a long way. Two from the ends of the earth, somehow; and somehow two who had always known each other profoundly.

"I know," said Bessie. Her hand touched his arm as lightly as a mist. "But, Slade, if you think she doesn't love you now, she *would*, you know, I'm—I'm sure——"

He looked at her.

Her eyes were dark for his pain.

They turned and walked slowly on without words. Unconsciously they drew closer to each other. They passed the arc-light, stepped into the shadow. Ahead of them loomed the old Laurel Street Bridge. Nothing seemed real to either but their own hearts beating.

Slade's blurred eyes searched the road ahead. He stared blindly. He saw——

He saw a part of the right-hand parapet of the bridge across the Passamint rise up and topple over the edge. A

full second later, as he halted, brushing a hand over his eyes, he heard a faint splash.

"Bess!" he cried, and before his mind could catch up, his feet had started running.

His heart thumped as he ran. He heard Bessie's foot-fall behind him and the swish of her skirt.

"What is it, Slade?"

He was at the parapet, leaning over.

"Dunno. It's—there's——"

In a flash he remembered from boyhood. The river was deep under the bridge.

"Slade!" As he wrenched off his coat, poised in white flannel trousers and white shirt, he heard her behind him. His knees bent. His sneakers gripped the parapet. By the moonlight he saw the blot moving in the water below.

It was a pretty dive. Slade had always been a pretty swimmer.

It was the longest three seconds of Bessie's life.

His hand flashed up in the moonlight to reassure her. He and whoever it was were struggling. She saw the heads together, an arm up. They disappeared in a splatter of silver. They bobbed up again. Silver began to trail. Slade was towing for the right bank.

Bessie was down through brush and brambles at the edge of the road. Her foot turned on a sliding stone. She was up again, her dress torn, panting. She was jumping accurately from rubble to turf, stooping under a low-swung branch, out by the water.

The dark heads moved in slowly, one dim blot. She could hear Slade's laboured breathing. A gulp. He was towing backward, swimming on his back. They were nearer. Bessie, careless of white shoes, was splashing into the shallows.

Her arm was under the back of the limp wet thing. The head rolled over, sagging in its soggy hair. Slade was threshing to his knees, to his feet, his skin showed pink through his soaked clinging shirt. Her dragging feet scored

the gravel, as they lifted her. Slade was standing over her, moving her arms up and down, up and down. "Thank God," gasping, "there's a log."

It was not needed. Horrible as some details seemed, ghastly as the face was, the eyes finally opened, staring at nothing. The teeth thinly rattled. "Ooo!" moaned Bessie. "She's shivering," said Slade. "She's soaked." He saw his coat in Bessie's hand and, lifting the woman, got it around her shoulders. "We must get her up to the house."

There was a faint ripple of boards from the bridge above.

"Hey!" shouted Slade. "Hey! Got a car?"

"What?" yelled a voice back.

"Quick!" shouted Slade. "Come down here!"

"What is it?" A form appeared at the parapet.

"Woman tried to drown herself. Can you drive us? Come down and help lift her, will you?"

"Sure. Wait a minute."

It turned out to be young Wilder in the farm Ford. He had a flask, too. The two young men staggered up the bank with the inert but breathing woman. Bessie picked her way, following.

The woman leaned helplessly against Slade's shoulder in the Ford. Bessie chafed one hand and arm, clammy as wet seaweed. The engine was running. The car jerked forward. There was a rasp of gears.

"Yeah, better drive her right up to Dr. Gedney's," said Slade. The Wilder boy was excited, but he drove carefully. The woman's eyelids fluttered and fluttered. Her breath came fluttering.

* * *

Dr. Gedney had been alone in his study, reading under his green-shaded drop-light. Finally he had glanced up from the volume of Voltaire's General History lying before him. He had been renewing his acquaintance with Scanderbeg of Albania. There was full moonlight in the side yard, The

twisted old apple-tree writhed dark, pooling shadow. Did something move beneath it? He distinctly saw something move. The window was open. He called, "Bessie!"

A form had detached itself, had made indistinctly across the yard to the street. Somebody. He could not see accurately. "Who is it?" he had called in his high mild voice. Whoever it was had disappeared. He went out into the hall, out on the porch. He went down the porch steps, down the path to the gate. He had looked up and down Poplar Street. Nobody. The branching elms were thick and shady down Poplar Street. Perhaps that was why it was called Poplar Street. There was a street lamp five yards off—beyond that, thickening shadow. Could that be someone moving, far off? Still. "Funny," Dr. Gedney had mused.

"Some boy playing tricks," Dr. Gedney had decided, mounting the steps.

* * *

Coryat had finished his explanation. Mrs. Ventress had finished her addenda. Uncle Arthur was finished.

The rushing rattle of a car came up the Farm Road. It slowed, slurred, rasped, rattled into the Axter Road. Coryat turned on the steps. Adela stood distinct in the moonlight. She heard a voice call something beyond the hedge, as the car volleyed past, swaying in a rut. Had it been Bessie's voice?

"What's that?" asked Uncle Arthur, lumbering up. Coryat had run down to the gate. "They're turning into Poplar. Someone called to us, didn't they?"

"I thought it sounded like Bessie," answered Adela, bewildered.

"Let's——" began Coryat. But crises are felt, not talked about. They were all three out of the gate and moving toward the Poplar Street corner before they realised they had acted at all. Looking from the corner they saw by the nearby lamp a group of figures near the Gedney gate. The tail-

light of the Ford. It was drawn up in the gutter with throbbing engine.

By the time Uncle Arthur, Coryat and Mrs. Ventress arrived on the spot, someone had been hurriedly carried up the porch-steps by Slade and the Wilder boy. Bessie explained to them breathlessly. Mrs. Ventress followed her into the house and upstairs.

"Run around on Sycamore and ask Mrs. Harris if she'll come over. Tell her it's an emergency. Tell her Arthur Pollock is asking," said Uncle Arthur to the somewhat dazed driver of the car as he descended again from the upper floor. "She'll come. We'll need her. Then—I'll be mightily grateful—will you go for Dr. John?"

"My land," said Mrs. Harris. Then "No need to explain. Here; that's all right. Door didn't snap, that's all. I'm in." She paused for nothing, not even for her hat.

Dr. John Cornelius might not believe in the world state, but he was at the Gedney house within fifteen minutes.

Mrs. Ventress was sitting by the bedside upstairs. She had been displaying great practicality. Slade had insisted that it be *his* room, properly the spare-room. Mrs. Harris was moving about efficiently. Bessie hovered.

In the long living-room below the four men stepped about awkwardly over each other's feet, gathered near the fireplace. They conversed in low voices.

After some waiting, the stairs creaked. Dr. John Cornelius said from the doorway, "She's all right. Exhausted, that's all. Nothing's been found to identify her. She's been conscious but too dazed to talk. A little out of her head too. Let her sleep, that's all."

Slade had immediately been bundled away to change. He was now clothed dryly, though not altogether in his right mind.

"My nephew, Doctor," said Dr. Gedney. Dr. John shook hands with Slade.

"Quick work," he said dryly. "That lady owes you her life, eh? (He winked.) No need to notify anyone Gedney.

Attempted suicide's not a felony in this state. Guess that was it, what? She's absolutely all right. Keep her quiet. That's all. You can keep her here to-night, can't you?"

"Oh, certainly, certainly!"

"Right. Course it may have been an accident. We'll try to find out who she is. G'night."

CHAPTER XXIX: MISS ANN COLE AGAIN

YOU didn't see her?" Uncle Arthur turned to Dr. Gedney.

"Just a bare glimpse. A white face. Closed eyes."

"There's something fine about her face," said Slade. "She seems awfully frail, though. I hope the shock——"

"Well, Dr. John seems to think it's all right," returned his bulky uncle.

"I know. But you can't tell."

"I suppose there's no use going up?" asked Dr. Gedney nervously. "I—I don't think we should make Mrs. Ventress——"

"I don't think she should have any worry about this, either," said Slade quickly. "I'll go up and see if I can't persuade her——"

He went out of the door.

"You may set your mind at rest about one thing, Charles," said Uncle Arthur. "About Mrs. Ventress. Mr. Coryat and I——"

They heard Slade's voice overhead. The shutting of a door. The murmuring of voices. Uncle Arthur began to explain what he meant.

"So you see," he concluded, "we have all been under a grave misapprehension. She still doesn't know how the name—but really, I—er—er—I—somehow I feel as though we owed her an apology."

They heard a woman's step, and a heavier one, coming downstairs.

"I'm taking Mrs. Ventress home," said Slade in the doorway.

"Good night, Doctor. She's sleeping quietly," said Adela's

own voice at Slade's shoulder. All three men moved forward. Mrs. Ventress nodded and said good night. Dr. Gedney accompanied her and Slade through the screen door out onto the porch. Under the porch light she knew his eyes upon her. She gazed back at him frankly, sadly, sympathising. He extended his hand.

"Good night, Mrs.—Mrs. Ventress," said the Doctor rustlingly. "You have been extremely kind. I feel that we owe you an apology—especially for the—for these—for the attitude of the town."

Certainly one should never have distrusted her eyes. Well, he had not.

"No," she said slowly. "In some ways I have been at fault, myself, I think. I can understand Mr. Pollock's agitation, anyway. I feel—you know how I *must* feel about this other—rumor—do you not?"

He bowed, courteously.

"I am so sorry," she said gravely. She shook his hand.

"I should have known anyway," he said to his brother-in-law and Coryat, when he had returned to the living-room. He shook his head slowly.

They were speculating on who the woman upstairs might be, when there was a step outside on the porch.

"The constable?" wondered Uncle Arthur, with his usual *flair* for the dramatic. But it was Mr. James White, proprietor of the Conestoga House.

"How'r'ye, Doctor? Met Doctor Cornelius. Tells me you got a woman here rescued from the river. My clerk tells me there's a woman came in to-day on the three o'clock, got a room, had supper at the hotel, went out soon after supper. Stranger. Ain't back yet. It's——" he glanced at his watch. All had completely forgotten the time. "It's a quarter to twelve. Course she may come in. He didn't know who she was, had only a suitcase. Didn't explain herself though she paid fer the room. He don't know where she went. I'm going on home. Told the night clerk to watch out for her. If she don't come in we'll give you a ring in the morning.

Registered as Miss Ann Cole, New York. Find any identification on this woman?"

"No. None. She's resting now. She mustn't be disturbed. Miss Ann Cole, did you say?"

"Why, but,—good Lord," said Coryat, starting forward. "What?"

"Why that's the name of the woman who—but there's no use going into the whole thing now. It's extremely odd, that's all. Most extremely. That's the woman who submitted that manuscript!"

He tried to explain what he meant. James White shrugged. What he "got" was that this man knew something about her. Well, he'd stop in to-morrow. They could straighten it out in the morning.

"If it is Miss Ann Cole," remarked Coryat, after the proprietor had gone, pacing the floor and ruffling his hair, "This certainly is the *qucerest*——!"

He retold the story of the manuscript to Uncle Arthur, who knew something about it, vaguely, from Slade. Dr. Gedney listened with interest.

* * *

Slade and Mrs. Ventress had paused at the latter's gate. He had just learned who she really was. He had learned indirectly that Coryat was nothing to her. And as she stood there and talked to him, every tone of her voice, every direct look, though entirely kind, showed him once and for all that—neither was he. Of course she must know that he had cared, that he still admired her tremendously. He tried—in the blundering way of men—to put something into words. The peculiar vanity of men, and especially young ones, made him feel a little ashamed. He blundered on Bessie's name——

"You are going to tell her?" she asked with swift divination, and he saw that she was really very happy about something. She reached out her hands to him impulsively. "Tell her, tell her," she said, and shook his hands up and down.

Her eyes sparkled. "Good night! Good luck!" she waved from the porch.

* * *

"My soul! It's a quarter to one," said Uncle Arthur. Just then Slade came blinking into the room. He had taken a turn along the Axter Road, thinking. His hair was tousled.

"Well, she told me too," he said, looking at Uncle Arthur. "But you didn't tell me, Coryat!" semi-reproachfully.

"Didn't have much time, old fellow. And I had to keep her secret, till she chose to have it told. By the way, we think that's Miss Ann Cole upstairs!"

"Christmas!" cried Slade, "How?"

Then that had to be explained.

Uncle Arthur had departed groaning. He had been heard to murmur as he went out of the house that he thought positively nothing of it.

"I'll sleep on the sofa down here," said Slade. He looked at Coryat out of the corner of his eye. Of course it was darned nice of Mrs. Ventress to be so happy for him and Bessie, but, after all, she needn't have been *quite* so happy. But then, as he scratched his head, the humour of his own wanting to have it both ways struck him. In compunction he prevailed upon Coryat, finally, not to give up his room. Dr. Gedney and Richard went upstairs as softly as possible. The Doctor paused at the door of the converted sick-room. It was opened a crack by Bessie.

"Good night, father! Mrs. Harris insists on staying. We're both going to sit up."

"But Bess, that's not right. Is there any real necessity?"

"You can't be sure. We'd really rather. And Mrs. Harris simply won't leave me."

A dim stout form appeared behind her.

"Make the child go to bed, Doctor. I'm absolutely all right. I'll watch. Many's the time I've watched. This

won't be the first. I don't mind. I can sleep all day tomorrow if I want to. There's a big easy rocker here and a couch. I can lie down if I want to. Make the child go to bed."

"Well, but Mrs. Harris, this is an imposition. I——"

"Nonsense." (all this in the same stage whisper.) "To please me, Miss Bessie. Go along. I'll call you if there's anything. It'll be all right."

Gently she pushed Bessie into the hall. Bessie turned to whisper with her for a moment through the crack of the door.

CHAPTER XXX: SLADE FACES THE INCREDIBLE

THE Doctor kissed his daughter and passed into his own room. Bessie suddenly knuckled her forehead and flew downstairs.

"Slade!" she called softly, outside the closed sitting-room door. It opened wide.

"What is it, Bess? I'm making up the sofa here. I'm going to sleep down here. I was going upstairs to see if I could get my pajamas."

Bessie had entered the living-room, where the light still burned.

"Oh, *Slade!*" she cried almost tearfully. He had dragged the sofa over nearer the largest window, which was wide open and screened. He had left one sofa pillow on it. The others remained on the floor where the sofa once had been.

"Oh, Slade, you're not going to sleep *that* way, you silly goop!"

"Sure, why not?" he asked, running one hand through his disordered hair. "I did think of a sheet—but we only had blankets in the army!"

"You just wait a minute . . . you silly *goop!*" diminished her voice from the hall. She went lightly upstairs and, in an incredibly short time, returned. She brought a pair of neatly folded sheets and a pillow which she held in her teeth as she shook it into a clean slip. He stepped forward to help her, but in a moment she had the sofa metamorphosed into a bed. "There!" said Bessie, triumphantly.

"It's a darn shame of them to leave you to sleep down here. Why didn't Mr. Coryat——?"

"Oh, but, Bess! He's a guest."

"Still; I don't care; it was mean of him. Here, I brought your things."

She tossed his bundled-up wrapper upon a chair.

"Oh, gosh, thank you ever so much. Lord, I'm—so-o—slee-eepy!"

Slade flexed his arms and yawned, entirely unheroically. He had removed his tie and his throat showed brown in his open soft collar. Suddenly his attitude snapped back.

"I beg your pardon, Bess. But I am sleepy."

She was at the door. "I know. Good night."

"Good night. Oh, by the way," said Slade, coming over. Hastily he told her about Adela's real name and about the new Ann Cole complication. They discussed these revelations in low excited voices.

Then, "Well, good night," said Bessie, hovering in the hall. "We'll know in the morning."

"Good——" returned Slade, leaning from the open door. Suddenly she came up to him.

"You know I think you were a perfect wonder this evening, don't you, Slade?"

He bent his head. "Oh, no," he muttered. "Oh, no——"

"Bess," he said muffledly.

"What?"

"I—oh, Bess, *Bess*,—I——"

He stooped suddenly, further, caught up her small sun-browned hand and kissed it quickly. He held it.

"Bess,—I love you," said Slade.

An instant later she freed herself.

He had never known such brightness could be in such eyes. She stood holding his hands for a breath, gripping them with all her small might. She turned suddenly and was flitting up the stairs. "Good night!" she whispered clearly, turning again. She was gone.

It was incredible. He stood behind the closed door of the living-room, staring. Staring at the lamp. It was simply incredible to be so happy. How blind he had been! But it didn't matter. It didn't matter.

Everything was changed? They *couldn't* be the same people! How could they? How the deuce was it? He would be afraid ever even to touch her again. She was so fragile, so delicate, ethereal. . . . She was—inexpressible!

The young gentleman in love sat down by the window. He sat there without stirring and without closing his eyes until four o'clock in the morning. All this time he held an unlit cigarette in his hand.

CHAPTER XXXI: ADELA THINKS IT OVER

MRS. VENTRESS also sat by her window, her bedroom window, till the small clock on her bureau thinly chimed twice. She had almost begun to doubt her own identity. As she had mounted to her room, heartily glad for Slade and Bessie, her mind had flashed back to Coryat and the point in their earlier conversation when they had been interrupted by Uncle Arthur.

She knew now, from what he had said later, about this Miss Ann Cole having called at *The Colosseum*. But she wondered whether he could possibly have thought that she, Adela, had—what?—had been that mysterious claimant of the authorship of “The Crystal Castle”? He had been speculating after she told him she had written something down here. If he had dared to think—— But she dismissed the idea. Still, Uncle Arthur had believed her, for some minutes, she was sure, to be Gertrude Gedney. And that was what the town certainly believed, now. She wondered after all just *who* she really was, as she put it to herself in intimate amusement. She was most certainly not Adela Ventress!

Ah, that was indeed the mystery! A phrase from Coryat’s conversation floated strangely into her mind. “The proper expression of personality—the first person singular.” And again, “I want *people*—not types.” Well! Her lip curled. She had expressed her personality, with a vengeance. Then she had tried to run away from it—and people had distrusted her. She had found them, the people—the real people. People who distrusted her. People with the most childish suspicions. Singular enough, certainly! Singular, the whole situation!

No, that was too bitter. Dr. Gedney, Bessie, Slade, had

not distrusted her. Uncle Arthur—in spite of his distrust—she certainly *adored*. Mr. Coryat certainly did not matter. She had been furious at him for finding out her hiding-place; but that was over now. After all, she supposed he was interested. Well, she had discouraged him as promptly as possible. . . .

What an extraordinary thing though, this drama of other lives. Yes, she had found real people, she *had* begun to live. It was all around her, the real material. Had she been cruel in making for it instinctively? But how could she ever have guessed?

It all came back so clearly now. . . . That morning she had gone up to the library to fill in a certain reference she had made in her latest manuscript novel to the time of the Boxer outbreak. She had spoken of her hero's exploits in the Rebellion. But she was shaky as to details. It had occurred to her that any New York paper of the time would give her enough material for vivid reference. By 'bus up Fifth she had finally reached her goal, the newspaper room in the northwest corner of the Library.

An obliging attendant had dumped down before her two enormous brown-cloth-bound files for the year 1900. She remembered that she had turned dusty brown-edged pages not without lamenting their soilure of her fingers. She could distinctly recall the white ceiling of the long room with its reflected lighting fixtures like inverted helmets, the brown wall of file on superimposed file of heavy bound newspapers, the tables on the opposite side of the room, with slanted rests of open papers, where early habitués stood to read. Outside the 42nd Street Crosstown cars had jarred and clanked, passing footfalls slurred. There was a constant low murmuring of voices. She had read of the hottest July seventeenth in the history of the Weather Bureau in fifteen years. There seemed to have been a great many deaths and prostrations. But her real curiosity had been the at-one-time vastly important news of Tien-Tsin captured. The Chinese, she read, had invaded Russian territory in the Amur district.

They had bombarded some unpronounceable city. Officials at Washington were confident that they would definitely know the fate of the envoys in a day or two. Li-Hung-Chang had started for Peking and had been appointed Vice-roy of the Province which was the centre of the Boxer outbreak. She had felt close upon the track, now, of her necessary material. She read on.

She rustled back the unwieldy pages as she pencilled her notes. The particular issue before her was now the first week in July, and her eyes had strayed to other phenomena of the summer. It was the year, she rediscovered, when "The Helmet of Navarre" was one of the popular novels. A three-inch advertisement of "Bonnie Briar Bush" informed her that "The Country is Flooded With Scotch Whiskey." The King of Italy had been assassinated at Monza. Amos Rusie had remarried his wife, the male shirt-waist was coming in, Sparklet bottles were popular, and a sea-horse on an exhibition pier at Atlantic City had given birth to one thousand baby sea-horses. Poring over such elegant trifles, on one page that bore the usual lists headed "At the Hotels" and "Arrival of Buyers," her novelist's eye had halted before the merest scrap of an A. P. despatch:

GIRL RUNS AWAY

She could still see the head, "Tupton, Pa.," it ran—and the date. Some such collocation of words as

Gertrude Gedney, only daughter of Dr. Charles Gedney and Mrs. Gedney of this town was found missing from her home this morning. She had left a note for her parents, explaining her action, the contents of which remain unrevealed. Miss Gedney was high-school valedictorian this June. She is of average height, with brown hair and brown eyes.

The words had fixed her attention. It was some time before she had turned the page. Unaccountably this curt mem-

orandum of implicit tragedy had held her eye. Turning many pages in a reverie she found herself again at the list of heat prostrations for that memorable day in July. Her eye had carelessly strayed down it. She remembered now—why, she remembered that she had been attracted by an odd name in it—a man's name, one that struck her mind with a queer euphony. . . .

Could it be possible?

She believed—that—that was it! The name. Why, she believed it *had* been "Roger Ventress"! Now she put her hands to her head and concentrated. Deep lines came between her brows. She concentrated with all her power.

"*Overcome at Wall and William Streets; Hudson Street,*" the accompanying text, from somewhere, floated back into her consciousness. All the hospitals to which the sufferers from heat collapse were taken were so listed.

So *that* was how she had unconsciously concocted that name of hers!

The "Adela" though? Adela. Adela. She could not account for it. It must merely have been that same author's feeling for names of a queer euphony. . . . She remembered having used the name for two separate characters in several of her novels. She had always rather fancied it.

Well, it was certainly a night for revelations!

She leaned her forehead against the window-frame, enveloped by the thick August darkness that flowed in upon her, with the heavy scent of flowers and the tiny sawing underhum of insects.

She felt the faint throb of a coming headache. She had felt it that morning at the library, she remembered, after having turned over all those pages. She had leaned back uncomfortably and put her hands to her blurring eyes. Her novelist's imagination had conjured up the picture of a slim figure hurrying through hot fields to the squat brown building of a junction station. Gertrude Gedney, running away. Why? Tupton. Gertrude Gedney. "She is of average height, with brown hair and brown eyes." How serviceable!

How could you find any lost girl through any such description!

What would it be like to return to such a town after—twenty years? In the state wrought by Terrill's book, she had fancied herself this girl, returning. She wanted to get away from them all, from her infernal literary reputation, anyway. She had also wanted to escape Coryat's attentions that had grown a bit too assiduous. Coryat. She had not yet quite forgiven him for the slight suspicion she believed he had harboured!

Her novelist's imagination had begun to revel. Suppose she should try it and see—pretend——. Oh, heavens no, that would be *too* cruel,—well, just pretend to herself. She would not pry into the affairs of these Gedneys, if they were still living. But she *would* like to see Tupton. It was a whim. But she would like to see Tupton.

She certainly had the money to indulge herself in whims if she wished. Her friend Phil Braston, of the Park Avenue Bank, could advise her as to how to arrange things financially.

So she actually *had* done it. She wanted to get away. Why not Tupton as well as any other place? Her friend, Ethel Aspern, had not at all understood her desire for Tupton, but she had agreed to receive a certain Mrs. Ventress's mail from that place. Mr. Duffitt's first letter had come to her—that horrible, ludicrous man! There had been another conference with Phil. Phil had taken over the transaction of the renting of a house—very kindly. What an enormous help he had been!

She had rented the Battell House, furnished, until the first of November. They were contemplating a summer's visit to their daughter in Oswego. Phil had attended to making Mrs. Ventress's references impeccable. He had even himself paid a flying visit to Tupton as a side trip to a business jaunt to Philadelphia. Phil and Ethel had always stood by her; Phil had been *his* best friend—the best friend of Ethel's brother, Lawrence.

If Lawrence had lived. . . .

No, she would never have dreamed of impersonating Gertrude. She had immediately rejected any such fantastic idea. Yet she *had* indulged her creative imagination far enough to pretend to herself she was Gertrude returning, as the Meldon Valley Railroad bore her into the town. Any such private theatricals had, however, ceased, of course, the moment she saw Bessie. Since then her only idea had been to help. And yet, she *had* been mistaken for Gertrude after all!

How utterly irrational life was! How queer that Gertrude's own adopted sister had become her most intimate friend. And how strange that Richard Coryat should mix himself up in all this again. She could never, never, never, of course, tell the Gedneys that she had chosen Tupton out of an idle curiosity and in a mood of whim. The motives had been innocent enough, with no cruel intention, but her motives had already been enough misunderstood. She did not know whether she could ever make Uncle Arthur quite understand about the name either—the name, Ventress. But she would try.

The one thing she deeply regretted was that the now probably long-dead or far-flown Gertrude's story was being revived in connection with this Roger Ventress. That hurt Dr. Gedney cruelly, she could see. It had worked Uncle Arthur nearly into a state of hysteria. It was, undoubtedly, a fantastic and puerile slander. But—well, she would try to see if, through some way of showing sympathy, she could not help Dr. Gedney.

And then there was this woman who had just nearly drowned herself. Who on earth was she? Well, at any rate, no one at all connected with this particular tangle of lives. . . .

Aa-ah, well! Goo-ood Heavens! That was two o'clock striking!

CHAPTER XXXII: AWAKENING

IT was four hours later that the woman in Slade's room upstairs stirred and sat up. Mrs. Harris sat humped in the big rocker, snoring gently. The pale woman in the bed felt wonderingly of her dark hair, so carefully and neatly braided. She put one hand over her forehead. She looked around the room rather wildly. She did not at all understand. What was this room, where was this house, who was this woman?

Mrs. Harris opened one eye. She blinked sleepily. Then she gave a prodigious sigh.

"Awake, dearie?" asked Mrs. Harris. "Better go to sleep again now. There!"

"Where am I?"

"You're safe, dearie. You're all right. It's so early yet. You get your sleep out."

"But—but—I don't—don't want sleep. I want—where *am* I?"

"Well, now, dearie, you know—something—er—happened."

The woman in the bed stared at her. Slowly something dawned in her eyes. On an indrawn breath, a desperate shivering sobbing began to shake her. Her right hand clenched, went to her mouth. She continued to stare at Mrs. Harris and to sob convulsively.

"There, there," said Mrs. Harris, stirred to her depths. She was by the woman's side, her stout arm about the shaken shoulders. "There, there, dearie. It's all right."

"Oh—oh—oh—o-oh!" desperately sobbed the woman.

"Does it come back to you, dearie,—does it come back? Well, don't you mind now,—don't you mind!"

"Why are you—but why are you so kuk-kuk-ki-ind?" sobbed the woman.

"There, there, dearie, really you'd best sleep!"

"But I can't sleep—I can't—I tell you I can't. I tried to—I tried to—oh, why, why, *why* didn't you let me?" coughed the woman hoarsely.

"Well, dearie," said Mrs. Harris practically, drawing up the big rocker, seating herself, and possessing herself of the white, blue-veined hand that quivered upon the light blanket, "Perhaps you'd better talk, then, if it will help you. Try to talk low. I'll listen. I understand."

The woman continued to stare at her.

"But you know all about it," she said finally. "You know all about it. Did you—did you—get me out?"

Her eyes widened as she stared; and then a croaking sound escaped her. Her mouth writhed. It was laughter. She had visualised Mrs. Harris as rescuer, plunging into the river. She could not help it. . . .

But she as quickly extended her hand, with a lovely, pathetic gesture. "Oh, I'm so sorry," she said, her voice much more normal. "I guess I've been a little crazy. I do think you're most extremely kind and good. I was determined I'd end it. And here I haven't. Just another instance of the complete irony——." She shrugged. "I see. I'm meant—for some villainously inexplicable reason—just to go on with it, interminably. Oh, very well. I'm sure you meant the best. You couldn't know. But——" A further realisation crept into her face. Again she looked around the room. "But—you see I was——," vaguely. "You see I—they mustn't—why, why it is—it is—it's so familiar. They've moved the bed, but—oh, oh, oh, it isn't; oh, it can't be!"

Then "I can't bear it! I can't bear it!"

Her hands were snatched from Mrs. Harris, her head down in her hands again, her shoulders shaking. "Oh, I can't, I can't, I can't——" she raved.

There was a movement at the door of the room. It was slowly opened. It was Bessie.

"Mrs. Harris?"

"Yes?"

"I heard. Can I help? Is there——? *Oh!*" She came timidly into the room in her grey wrapper. "She's awake!"

The woman in the bed stared at the girl in the grey wrapper, with her disarrayed dark hair and her face still flushed with sleep.

"Who are you?" she asked, hardly above a whisper.

"Now, now, that's Miss Bessie—Miss Bessie Gedney," said Mrs. Harris with the intention of being soothing. "You're all right. You're in Dr. Gedney's house, Dr. Gedney's house in Tupton——"

"Oh, I guessed, I guessed. Oh, I *knew*——!"

Suddenly the woman raised from the drowned seemed to take a tight grip upon herself. Though her shoulders shivered, her arms went straight down by her sides, the white tense hands clutched grimly. Her face set. It was very pale, the eyes in it burned.

"You're Bessie," she said, after a minute. Her chin rose. "You're Bessie, aren't you—you're—— Oh, aren't you coming to me, *aren't* you coming to me, aren't you——?"

Her arms were out, white, slender, imploring. Bessie, puzzled and amazed, was before her. She saw that the woman's face was working, that tears were in her eyes. She knelt with a swift motion and—they were in each other's arms.

"Why, I'm Gertrude, I'm Gertrude, Bessie,—I'm Gertrude, Gertrude . . . !" her half-sister was sobbing and sobbing. . . .

* * *

"Father, I must speak to you."

"But just a moment, Bess. I'm finishing shaving."

"But, father, I *must* speak to you!"

Dr. Gedney came to the door of his room. He looked out, still drying his face with a towel. His daughter was leaning

against the door-frame. Her eyes were tearful, her voice, when she tried to speak, husky.

"Father, finish quickly; go in there. It's someone, someone. Oh, father——"

She grasped his arms and the towel and clung to them. He was surprised, embarrassed, he paled.

"Listen, father. It's nothing terrible. Don't worry. Only I'm so glad, so glad!"

She was crying in his arms, quivering, quivering all over.

"Bess, my darling, what is it? Tell me, tell me?"

"It's, it's, it's, oh, it's Gertrude, father,—Gertrude come home!"

* * *

Slade sat up. Someone was rapping on the door.

"Ye-es?" sleepily.

"Slade!"

"Yes, yes indeed, one moment!"

He threw his wrapper around him.

"Slade, who *do* you think it is? Oh, Slade!"

He also was enveloped in an embrace. His head swam.

"Who is what? What? What?"

"Oh, Slade," Bessie said, as quickly releasing him in a wave of shyness, and standing away. "I couldn't help that. I'm wild this morning—wild and happy. It *isn't* any of your Miss Coles at *all*, you great silly! It *isn't*. You don't know. You couldn't guess——"

"Angel, what *are* you talking about?"

"It's Gertrude, Gertrude, *Gertrude!* What *do* you think of it? Just what *do* you?"

* * *

But of course, it *was* Miss Cole. It was, to be exact, Miss Ann Cole of Jenison Place, New York City. It was therefore bound to be the lady who had called at *The Colosseum* office. That had come out and been discussed before and

during breakfast. Breakfast that Sunday morning was a meal that no one remembered how they got through afterward. Which is a frightfully constructed sentence, but so well expresses the state of mind of everyone that I shall let it stand.

There is a fine old rural word to describe the feelings of both Slade and Richard. They were both completely "flabbergasted." As for Dr. Gedney, he appeared only after both had finished whatever they had eaten—they could not quite remember—and were lingering in earnest converse, interrupted by Bessie, over their second cups of coffee. Dr. Gedney looked more amazed than he would probably ever look in his life again. His thin hair was all astray. He had forgotten to brush it. He had also forgotten to put on a necktie and no one thought of reminding him of it. He sat down like one in a trance and began to stir his coffee with his butter knife.

"It is certainly Gertrude, *certainly* Gertrude. It is perfectly amazing," was all he could say.

Bessie was radiant. Nothing could dash her this morning. She kissed Slade behind the hat-rack in the hall, but would not have him follow her as she hurried down to the gate and over to Mrs. Ventress's. However, she looked back so frequently to smile reassuringly that she ran plump into Uncle Arthur. Then there were explanations indeed!

* *

"My soul," said Uncle Arthur, standing later, porpoise-like, before the fireplace. "My soul!" he puffed. "My soul, Mr. Coryat,—my soul!" The cigar in his mouth was terribly maltreated. He kept on reaffirming the existence of his inward and spiritual grace. He seemed incapable of anything consecutive.

It had been insisted upon by Mrs. Harris that the lady should go back to her interrupted sleep. By tact and perseverance that only Mrs. Harris knew the way of, she had

finally been soothed off. The other inhabitants of the household moved about on tiptoe. Annie in the kitchen was completely bewildered. She wondered how she had managed to get through the dishes.

* * *

Bessie stayed at Mrs. Ventress's a full hour. She had left Gertrude sleeping. Within that hour Adela had explained to her what she and Coryat had already made quite clear to Uncle Arthur. There was also talk about Slade on Bessie's part—and the truth came out. Over and above that Bessie and Adela put their heads together about this Miss Ann Cole complication. Bessie's opinion of Coryat in this connection, with regard to his suspicion, if any, of Mrs. Ventress, was that, if that were so, he was most certainly insufferable. As to Gertrude—that was, of course, the news Bessie had burst in with.

But one thing was evident, Gertrude, as Miss Ann Cole, *had* told the editor of *The Colosseum* that she was also Richard Terrill. Coryat, on the Gedney porch, racked his brains over this until he simply gave it up. Uncle Arthur, puffingly rocking beside him, had no interest in that side of the situation; his mind was completely occupied with one cataclysmic fact. "So Gertrude *has* come back!" he kept repeating.

The proprietor of the Conestoga House found him *distracted*, simply asseverating that it *was* Miss Cole, that the patient herself had admitted it, and that she would most certainly remain at Dr. Gedney's for the present. Her bag could be sent up. (Dr. Gedney had not wanted the real truth known just yet.)

* * *

"I *was* going to be very angry with you," said Mrs. Ventress, frankly humorous, to Richard Coryat, when he appeared about eleven, having been able to offer no distraction to Uncle Arthur's incessant rocking and groaning, and hav-

ing become too intensely sorry for his still unlighted and now utterly chewed-up cigar.

"Yes, I was going to be very angry with you. You have suspected *me* of writing that story. Don't try to deny it! I don't know *why* you did—and it was ludicrous—but you did. But now, since we all seem to be caught up in a perfect whirl of the impossible and I'm seriously inclined to think we've all gone crazy,—I have decided to forgive you. Won't you sit down?"

"Thank you. *Indeed* I really didn't! How could I possibly know who this Mrs. Ventress really was? The name—there was another suspicion entirely in my mind."

"Oh, all right; we'll wipe that score off."

"But everything seemed so baffling——!"

Mrs. Ventress smiled, looking away from him. She was in full possession of herself to-day.

"What do *you* think?" asked Richard, missing that smile only for the playful gods. "You think she actually *is*——?"

"Richard Terrill? Yes, I think so."

"But how on earth——"

"Oh, *I* don't know how on earth——! For that matter I don't know how on earth *anyone* could write so well as that. But I might have known it couldn't be a man. (There was a thrust in this.) I simply know now that I should have known all along it was a woman."

"Well, it's all beyond *me*."

"Have you seen her yet?"

"No. Hadn't even a glimpse of her face when they were carrying her in last night. Is she pretty?"

"How typically masculine," said Mrs. Ventress. She laughed. "Why she was very nearly drowned!"

"And Slade rescued her——" he mused, seriously. "That's another strange thing!"

"Oh, there are plenty of strange things this morning," remarked Adela. "Plenty. As for me, I don't know. Life is rather too exciting in rural communities. I'm beginning to yearn for the strident monotony of New York!"

CHAPTER XXXIII: UNMISTAKABLY MRS. VENTRESS

GERTRUDE was able to talk to her father on Sunday afternoon. The Doctor even thought she might come downstairs for lunch in several days. Of course they wouldn't worry her with questions about the Richard Terrill business, not just at first. It was after having had a refreshing sleep on Sunday that, about four in the afternoon, she asked for her father.

She was quite calm now and a little colour had come back into her face. Her brown hair was braided demurely. Her brown eyes were soft. Dr. Gedney thought sadly to what fineness pain and trouble had chiselled her profile. She held him with her eyes. If he got up for any reason and moved about, her eyes followed him. She had held his hand quite simply all the time they talked together. They had already gone into the events preceding her running away. Dr. Gedney had avoided, however, as much as possible, much reference to Martha. It seemed to reopen tragic discussion unnecessarily.

"But, my dear child," he said, after she had recounted some of her real experiences in England, "why did you always tell me everything was going so well?"

"Because—oh, because, father, every year I lived I came more to realise—well, you know—I wouldn't have had you worried . . . though I suppose that sounds so strange a thing to say, considering . . . considering . . ."

"No. I understand. But I think you should have told me. I'm not blaming you for anything, you know!"

"Oh, Father, but don't think—even though—even though—that I was so—so horribly selfish as—as——"

"I don't *mean* you were selfish, my dear child. Indeed I don't."

"I know, Father. I know. But truly it wasn't that! It was just that I hated failure so; that I wanted to show I had the stuff in me; that every year slipped and slipped away from me without *anything* to show. I soon had to give up being her secretary. She was a very perverse and demanding woman. The relationship became impossible. I got odd jobs. I lived along. I tried my hardest. And I'd have only been—I'd have only been—such a nuisance——"

Her voice broke on that last trivial word.

"I knew of Bessie. I wanted to help her. Maybe you can't believe it, but, oh, how I wanted to help her! And yet, I couldn't give up still trying to make my own way, to make a success of my life. Oh, I tried a lot of things! And I tried to write. But it's amazingly difficult—it isn't that you're superior—it's amazingly difficult to write if you really—if you really—Oh, if you're not easily satisfied with what you do. It's difficult to write the kind of thing that gets you ahead financially. It's just that it's so difficult. I have my own talent. I wrote a book that was published in England. I knew it was good. It *was* good. It fell perfectly flat. My vein was thin. Then I got sick. Oh, well, that all sounds so like special pleading, I know; but you see—you see—my heart was——"

She broke off. He hardly heard the last words. Gradually what she had said was borne in upon him.

"My dear, dear child! Can you—tell me anything more?"

"Oh yes, I'll tell it all," the low monotonous voice went on. "When I ran away—— Oh, you'll have to know. That is the least I can do—now. There was a man—a boy—who came here. You wouldn't remember him. He—— I thought I loved him."

Dr. Gedney was holding her hands tightly.

"Who was he, dear?"

"His name——" the monotone hovered. "His name was Roger Ventress. He was Judge Lindon's nephew," she said

tiredly, "I met him at that Institute dance—at my Commencement. He——"

"Yes, dear," said the Doctor, but his breath drew in audibly and his teeth clenched.

"Oh, it's not a very bad story. Just that he persuaded me to—to run away and meet him—in New York. There was nothing else between us before—before we were married——."

"Married? . . . Yes, go on, dear," said Dr. Gedney. The thin, tired voice went on, pitiful in its cadence.

"Yes, you see, I met him in New York and we were married. And then—there was a terrible heat-wave in New York that summer. Roger was prostrated. He was downtown and he fell in the street. I never used to look at the papers. They took him to the Hudson Street Hospital. I didn't know where he was for twenty-four hours. I was all alone. When I finally found out and called up the hospital—they—they told me Roger was dead."

She paused again.

"It was—rather horrible. You see, our marriage was such a secret. No one knew. He wasn't . . . we weren't living together just at first. . . . He used to come to me. . . . You see, he was going to fix it up, but he had to break it to his parents. So of course they didn't know then. And they were there—at the hospital; and Judge Lindon too, who had come on. The hospital people said so. And Roger was dead. . . . And what did anything matter. . . . So I packed a suitcase and left the apartment and hunted up a boarding house, a cheap one. . . . I called myself Jane Bartlett. . . ."

She stopped to smile a haggard smile. "I've——" she said, "I've had so many names!"

". . . And then, you see, I got sick. I was very ill—for two months. . . . I'll never forget how Mrs. Sullivan—that was my landlady—mothered me and saw me through. . . . And then there was this young newspaper man who lived in the same house, and began to be very nice to me; and through him I got a job. . . . And it was really through his encour-

agement I later began writing. . . . Well, finally we were engaged. I told him—I told him the story—not who Roger was or about Tupton—but, the story. . . . He said he understood, he didn't want details. . . . It was all so happy after that for a while, for a little while. . . . Then—we quarrelled. . . .

"You see, we got to differing over what we both considered fundamental principles of life. . . . So, though we both loved each other, we broke off the engagement. . . . He went away. . . ."

Dr. Gedney could not look at her face. But now her voice gathered strength.

"Well, after—after he went away—or—no, that isn't fair either, for I know, too, that I sent him. . . . We were both proud and fierce. I don't think we ever *really* differed,—it was seeing the same thing in different lights. And—I always had a will. He had too. We were both—proud and fierce. . . . It was one of those things. . . . Well, after that, I did get along a little better with writing, and sold a few magazine stories; and I met men of course, but no one interested me in the same way. . . . And then I got this chance to go to England. . . . That was when I wrote you. That was when I wrote my novel, under a pen-name, 'Richard Terrill'——"

"*Richard Terrill!*" murmured the Doctor.

"What?"—a little plaintively.

"Nothing, dearest. It's all right. Go on."

"Oh, in some way you've heard of it. Well, yes, it was mine. It never made anything though. No attention was paid it. Well—this Spring I came back. . . . I had a little money. I tried again to do something with my writing. I lived in a small two-room affair on Jenison Place. There were a few of us trying to write, down there. We scabbled along somehow. You see—well, I wasn't very happy,—and it didn't seem to matter finally much what I did, or whether I ever got anywhere or not,—for I'd never been able to do what I wanted to—be a real financial success, so I could

come back to you to really help. . . . And of course—oh, Father,—you will know, anyway, how unhappy I have been!"

"I know, I know," he said huskily. "My dear, dear child!"

"Well, that's it. Then I did get a magazine interested in a story that had gone begging. But some one found out that it was like 'Golden Windfall'—that had been my novel—how they knew it over here I can't imagine!—and so I couldn't convince the editor I'd written it. You see, he wanted proofs that I was Richard Terrill. And I hadn't any real proofs—except a copy of the book—which was no proof at all. . . . The firm failed long ago, and one of the original publishers is dead, and one—I don't know where—and I hadn't kept my contract or royalty statement. . . . There was only one small royalty—ever. . . . And so they thought I was a liar, and I didn't see any real way of convincing them I wasn't . . . at least for a long while. . . . It was the only thing I'd ever written under the name of Terrill, 'Golden Windfall.' . . . Well. . . . So there it was. . . . And then, of course, there was something else—something else that—that—well, another thing that had hurt me awfully. . . . So I thought I'd crawl back here. I even stole up to the house, last night—before. . . . Oh, it was sentimental and cowardly—but—I've been strange to myself for months. Everything has just seemed . . . at an end. And now you see the irony—of it all!"

Her voice died out. Her profile, with locked lips, was white and grim. Her eyes stared brightly at the wall. It scared Dr. Gedney, but it was a full moment before he could speak. Then he began to reassure her slowly, calmly, quietly, with infinite tenderness. Her eyes never left his face.

Fragmentarily Slade gathered the story after supper, partly from Dr. Gedney's jerky remarks, partly from Bessie, on the long walk they took out the Axter Road. Mrs. Ventress had called in the afternoon, when Dr. Gedney was with his daughter. Coryat gathered little from the Doctor that evening. Uncle Arthur came over for a little while. The three men sat and talked, mostly of other things.

CHAPTER XXXIV: THE PERPLEXITY OF BEING A CROWD

WHEN it was announced that Gertrude was coming down to lunch the next day—that the Doctor thought it would be quite all right—Coryat asked to be allowed to take lunch at the hotel. He insisted. It would be their first reunion; Uncle Arthur was to be there; he, Richard, would certainly not intrude. He finally had his own way—to their relief as well as his, if the truth be told.

It was not till dessert that the pale, frail, brown-eyed lady, sitting upright at the side of the table beside Slade, eating little and constantly turning her eyes from one to the other, was able to say very much to them all. A bold sort of shyness seemed to hold her silent. She smiled at almost everything they said. All the others somehow felt themselves amazingly awkward.

It was a strangely quiet meal, for all their happiness. Uncle Arthur blew his nose several times and gazed at the ceiling. His rhetoric had quite deserted him.

"Poor Coryat," said Slade finally, in a long pause that made him feel uncomfortable. "He thinks he's been perfectly awful, now he knows Gertrude wrote that story—awful, I mean, because, without knowing it, he made old T. B. suspect her."

It was the first direct reference any of them had made to the manuscript.

As Gertrude now turned her head toward Slade, startled, Bessie began to explain.

"You see, Gertrude dear, Slade is on *The Colosseum*, that magazine you took your manuscript to. He was away, though; out here in fact, that day you came in for it. But when he got back, of course he heard——"

"Yes. Oh, yes I've realised. I suppose 'old T. B.' is the editor I talked to. But *now* you believe I wrote it, don't you?"

"Of *course*. We all *know* it."

"But Slade mentioned a man's name—I didn't quite catch it—the man who suspected I was imitating Terrill; or, I mean, that it was *by* Terrill?"

"Oh, yes," said Slade. "Richard Coryat. He——"

Gertrude's face had gone as white as wax. She seemed actually to sway in her chair. She opened her lips to speak, and closed them.

"What is it?" asked everyone in different degrees of alarm.

"You——" said Gertrude. "You said his name——"

"Why," said Slade, round-eyed, "his—he's—I mean, it's Richard Coryat. He's my guest here now you know. He would have been here to lunch——"

"*Richard Coryat——here——?*"

"You—you say—he's——" Gertrude's stupefied whisper went on.

One moment she was staring blankly at Slade, the next she was bending forward over the cloth, like a person preparing to say grace,—slipping sideways. . . .

Bessie caught her in her arms.

"Give me that glass of water, Slade," she said in an eerily controlled voice, as they all leaned forward. "She's fainted."

* * *

Coryat had returned to find that Gertrude had gone upstairs again; Dr. Gedney asked him if he wouldn't speak to him a moment in his study. The Doctor had been thinking considerably, in his unrevealing, taciturn fashion. Coryat would know a Jane Bartlett—or he would not. He did.

More than that, he was thunderstruck by the name. The Doctor had not revealed it yet to the family. Certain things Gertrude had told him still remained secret between herself

and him. When she chose to tell—but not before. Now, however, the mention of this particular name had seemed necessary.

Coryat came out of the study finally looking somewhat haggard yet wildly glad. Dr. Gedney's hand was on his shoulder. Slade had gone out for a walk. Bessie had been with Gertrude. Slade was furiously cogitating. When she had recovered from her faint Gertrude would say nothing. Bessie and her father had helped her upstairs. Mrs. Harris had gone home that morning.

It was four o'clock. Bessie informed her father, in a stage whisper from the head of the stairs, that she had told Gertrude that Richard was in the house. They had just had a talk. Gertrude wanted Richard to come up.

* * *

The room was dim. Gertrude was sitting up in the large rocker. Afternoon sunlight sifted across the floor, across her knees, through the closed slats of the white shutters at the window. Coryat, from the doorway, saw a white blurred face, a figure in white—muslin it was—with some sort of a blue scarf about her shoulders. Large eyes watched but no voice spoke to him.

Richard's head bent as he went toward her. He stood in front of her with his eyelids drooped till his eyes seemed closed. Then he opened them and their eyes met.

He was on his knees beside her chair. Her right hand hesitatingly disengaged itself and rested lightly upon his hair.

"Oh, Jane, Jane, Jane, Jane——"

* * *

"Still," said Gertrude softly, after a long, long while, "You know you did *not* recognise me. You know you didn't. . . . That—that—hurt my feelings. . . ."

Considering everything, that was not an overstatement.

Richard, unæsthetically, gave a loud hysterical gulp. Jane—Gertrude, I mean—was crying quietly. Well, I suppose it must be confessed that Richard was, too. Neither did it add any particular coherence to the situation that he continued calling upon an entirely mythical female alternating her name with that of his maker.

"Oh, Jane—my Lord, Jane—oh, Jane,—oh, my Lord!"

You see that last remark had been Jane all over.

* * *

"Well, honestly," said Slade, sprawled limply in a big leather chair in the living-room—after Bessie had told him.

"Well, honestly! No, Bess,—you're making it up!"

That nearly precipitated their first quarrel.

"Slade," said Bessie, quite seriously for a moment, "I thought you had more romance——!"

"Romance, angel, isn't enough. It doesn't seem to me to cover the situation. My head's spinning. Who is this cousin of mine, after all? I'll bet to-morrow she'll turn out to be somebody else. Think of it! Jane—what-did-you-say?"

"Jane Bartlett. Really, Slade, you shouldn't make fun of her."

"Make fun of her, angel! Lord knows I'm not making fun of her. I'm just trying to keep my reason. Let's see. Jane Bartlett, Ann Cole, Gertrude Gedney, and—why not even content with her own sex—Richard Terrill! Is it any wonder! Oh, I'm *not* being unkind! But how does she think of *herself*? Talk about multiple personality and all that sort of thing. Talk about the first person sing—golly, that's good! The first person singular! Singular enough. What?"

Bessie had been regarding him not altogether with approval; but now her lips twitched. They were laughing together.

"But, but still, Slade,—you don't seem to realise that it's so *real* to *them*!"

"Oh, you bet I do! Isn't something pretty real to us too? Listen!"

They could hear the voices still murmuring on the floor above.

"What I'm really worrying about," said Slade twinkling, "is how this is going to hit Uncle Arthur. Honestly I don't believe Uncle Arthur will be able to assimilate much more of this without a stroke."

When Coryat came down, looking dazed and yet strangely smiling, Slade repeated this to him, after the first fitting remarks had been made. It was appreciated.

"I'm taking my bag down to the Conestoga House, as I'll be staying on till Jane—uh, well,—I mean Gertrude, I suppose—gets absolutely well."

"But look here, Richard," said Slade, "You don't mind do you—since you—since it——"

"I wish you wouldn't refer to my fiancée as It," returned Richard.

Slade blushed. "Well, I mean—didn't Gertrude—well, long ago—tell you anything about—about us—I mean, about her—her family?"

Coryat shook his head.

"She told me—do you know?—of her marriage," he said in a low voice. "And she would have told me——. But she only mentioned the man's name once to me, as I remember. I told her not to tell me anything if it hurt her. But now you see, that was the name I was trying to remember. She was always Jane, to me—Jane Bartlett. But when you said 'Mrs. Ventress', it worried me—it worried me. I couldn't really remember, and yet I remembered dimly."

Later, when the conversation took a lighter turn, Slade took hold of Coryat's arm.

"Richard, don't—don't think I'm,—well, inopportunistically jocular; but I had forgotten the 'Mrs. Ventress', and now—she's going to change her name again. Do you see what I mean. It really *is* extraordinary when you stop to think of

it. I mean—I mean—that makes *six* names in all, counting in 'Terrill'!"

"Yes, it *is* so," said Coryat, with a rather strained smile. "Well,—tell you one thing, Slade. If she doesn't want to keep *this* one till the end of her life, it'll be because my best is no good, no good at all. Catch me boasting—any more—but, wait and see!"

"I believe you!" answered Slade.

"By the way," he added, "in this rush of events a small matter—not small to us, though,—is likely to be overlooked. We haven't told anyone yet—but——"

"You mean," said Bessie truthfully, "that *you've* told no one but Uncle Charles, and I've spoken to no one but Gertrude and Adela. Well, now we're even. Two each!"

"Another facer for Uncle Arthur, though," moaned Slade mock-tragically.

CHAPTER XXXV: UNCLE ARTHUR'S HOUR

THEY were still laughing at that when Uncle Arthur loomed upon them from the doorway.

But his expression stopped them.

"I am glad you young people can enjoy the situation," he boomed sepulchrally. "I—I have been enjoying myself in a very different fashion."

He stood before the fireplace and regarded the knuckles of his right hand. They seemed to be somewhat bruised.

"Mrs. Ventress and I——" he began.

Slade stared his wonder.

"Mrs. Ventress and I," continued Uncle Arthur, solemnly,—“I happened to meet her on Sycamore Street—we were walking along the Axter Road. I was escorting her back to her residence——”

"Oh," breathed Slade relievedly.

Uncle Arthur breathed also, but heavily. He had flirted out his handkerchief and blew his nose loudly.

"I shall have to go farther back, however," he resumed. "The information came to me recently as to our friend Mr. Duffitt—namely, that he has had a considerable hand in these recent atrocious rumours. About, for instance, Mrs. Ventress—being Gertrude."

"What!" ejaculated Slade and Bessie.

Uncle Arthur merely nodded.

"I entirely agree with you. But such rumours have been widely spread. You can imagine what your Uncle Charles and myself have been going through. But now—now I have met this miscreant. . . !"

Uncle Arthur's jaw had become prognathous.

"——I had been talking to Mrs. Ventress about it. She

informed me that this, this person, had been insulting to her upon a certain fairly recent occasion. She did not tell me much—but I could gather—— She had decided to let the whole matter drop. She told me about it simply to offer a possible motive for his spreading scandal. Well, suddenly——” Uncle Arthur paused dramatically.

“Suddenly we came face to face with—with this—this creature, turning out of Poplar. I stopped him. I charged him with the entire matter. The wretch cringed before me. He attempted flight,—he attempted,” said Uncle Arthur, “to turn and flee. . . .

“I have discovered that I am still agile for my years, and (if I may be allowed to speak of it) for my weight. He—he did not escape me.”

His face, somewhat pale with excitement when he began, had now a ruddy satisfaction upon it. “Why, bully for you, sir!” exclaimed Slade, choking.

“Mrs. Ventress,” continued Uncle Arthur, “attempted to dissuade me. At the moment, however, even at her request——. I—I am afraid I have seriously abraded my knuckles upon the miscreant,” the Colossus said thoughtfully. “But,” he added with tremendous unction, “in the words of the fabled Irishman—‘if I have done anything I am sorry for I am glad of it!’ ”

“Oh, to have been there!” Slade grinned afterward. “But the recital in itself——”

As for the Coryat-and-Gertrude, Slade-and-Bessie business, that all came out later in the evening. They spared Uncle Arthur any additional excitement. Dr. Gedney broke the news to him in the study.

“Charles,” was Uncle Arthur’s final wild ejaculation, “am I dead, or living in a dream? I think nothing—I mean,—*heavenly Xerxes!*”

CHAPTER XXXVI: FINALLY, THE FIRST PERSON SINGULAR

IT took Gertrude two weeks fully to recover her strength. In the meanwhile Mr. Duffitt had gone on a protracted visit to Barrack Falls. That Autumn he removed there permanently. He never swore out a warrant against Mr. Pollock for assault. So far as Tupton was concerned he never applied for postliminy.

Miss Crome kept closely to her domicile even when the astonishing news about the real Gertrude Gedney and the real Mrs. Ventress began to filter through to the town. Miss Crome felt discomfited. It may have been because of a description Jason had given her, ere he departed, of Mr. Pollock's state of mind. And then Miss Crome had run into Rebecca Stone shortly after the real truth was known.

"Miss Crome," said Rebecca, stepping implacably in front of her, "my first impulse was to cut you—cut you dead. But I won't. But I *should* like to tell you what I think of you. Well, I only hope you will never speak to me again, Miss Crome,—never, never, never speak to me again!" She had turned her back and marched off with flashing glasses. So exactly like Rebecca. But—Rebecca was a Stone.

Upon one morning of her convalescence Gertrude sat talking to—well, *shall* we continue to call her "Adela"? At all events the two Mrs. Ventresses were sitting in the living-room of the Gedney house talking things over.

To be even more exact, Gertrude was lying upon the couch, Adela—if we are to continue calling her that—sat beside her.

"How did you happen to call yourself Adela?"

"For much the same reason, my dear, that you happened to call yourself Jane. It occurred to me!"

"Wasn't it strange—the 'Ventress'?"

"Yes,—wasn't it—but haven't you ever done that—had a name—or a phrase, perhaps—sink into your brain, without your knowing it, to be resurrected——"

"Oh, yes, often. It's queer."

Silence.

"I've brought you a book, 'Richard Terrill'."

Gertrude raised her head. Flora laid the gaudily-jacketed volume upon her lap. She took it up.

"That's the kind of thing, you see. Isn't it terrible!"

"Well——"

"You know it is. But will you give me a copy of *your* book some day, for my own. I've returned—I suppose you call the villain 'Richard'—I've returned him his own copy."

Gertrude smiled.

"If you really want my book——"

"Why, child, child, haven't I just been telling you all it's done for me!"

"No. Not all that. Look how *you* can write. That story——"

"Oh, the story I took to Philadelphia to have typed, the story I thought I'd try on some publisher anonymously? But that's all *your* doing!"

"Why, it's *entirely* your own!"

"You think so?"

"Of course."

"You darling to think so! I hope so. I've sent it off to-day, but I'm going to use my own name after all. I'm sure I don't know what my agent will think of it!"

"What does that matter. It's remarkable. You—it's wonderful."

"Then maybe I *have* accomplished something, after all, by coming down here?"

"But of *course* you have. Can't you see it? Why you can do *anything*——!"

"Praise from Sir Hubert Stanley! But I *am* glad. You'd

never have guessed, would you, that I had written, so much of—*that!*”

She touched the volume on Gertrude's lap lightly, with her forefinger.

Gertrude laughed.

“But I'm not going to *let* you run down your work this way. I'm sure there's a lot of remarkable writing in this——”

Flora shook her head violently.

Gertrude went on.

“I knew your name of course. Who doesn't. But I certainly never thought I'd meet you. And now you say my book had all this influence. It's very strange. And so you sent the poor movie man away? I somehow feel rather sorry for him.”

“So did I. Poor Mr. Seelye. But imagine his ferreting me out like that! He admitted he got the information through a stenographer in the office of my publishers, a girl he happened to know, who blabbed. Anyway, I gave him some supper. It *was* rather pathetic the way he talked and talked and tried to convince me.”

“Well, to think,” said Gertrude dreamily, “that *I* could ever any help to *anyone*. Do you think,” naïvely, “that I'm very bad, Flora?”

“I think you're perfectly wonderful!”

“I don't. I'm pretty bad. Pretty selfish. Pretty—oh, but it *is* all right now. With Richard.”

Flora looked up and away. She did not answer. Not that she was thinking of Coryat. She was thinking of Lawrence, Ethel Aspern's brother. She was thinking. . . .

“Jane,” she said then. “You know *I* think ‘Jane’ really suits you far better than ‘Gertrude’!—Jane, I want to tell you something. I've never—told it——”

“If you want to, Flora. You know you can trust me.”

“I know. Jane, you—you silly darling—you ask me if I think you're bad. *You!* Do you think *I'm* bad? That's

more to the point . . . But why should you have to listen to a life-story?"

"Tell me. Please."

"Well, I'll spare you a lot of it. I was born in Chicago. My family were—very wealthy. I was very—very society; came out, one of the younger set—all that. Then I decided one day there was nothing in it—wanted to make my own way. The only person who retained any interest in me after that was my brother. My father—tried to do what is known as 'putting your foot down'. My mother simply thought I was demented. I did what I wanted to, though, and went in for studying illustrating. There was a man at the school. Harry Walker. There were a good many scenes at home about that time. I married Harry. My parents were furious. Marrying Harry almost completely estranged me. But I saw my brother occasionally.

"Well, there's no use raking up the details of an unhappy marriage. It turned out that way. Harry was absolutely uncontrolled, irresponsible. He drank, and so on. I got to a point where I couldn't stand it. I consulted with my brother. I ran away—to a friend of mine, Ethel Aspern, in New York. My mother and father had acted so badly to me that I wouldn't have thought of going back to them.

"My brother stuck by me. Sent me money, promised me help, financial and otherwise, whenever I wanted it. I had no money of my own, wouldn't have taken any from the family. Ethel helped me. A friend of theirs, a Mr. Bruston, helped me. I was set and determined to repay them all they had lent me and make my way by my own efforts. I finally did—through that kind of thing."

She tapped the book on Gertrude's lap.

"Still—I began—differently. You see— Well— Well, there was Lawrence—Ethel's brother. Lawrence and I fell in love. Lawrence died. Typhoid. So, that was *that*.

"Well, after that, I just went ahead blindly. Determined to make money. Determined to be dependent upon or under

obligation to no one. Had my pride. You see—he had been the One. No one else——”

Gertrude had taken her hand and held it in a firm, warm grasp. Neither of the women spoke for a few moments. Flora suddenly turned and bent her head to Gertrude's. For another few moments they sat so, nothing said, little murmured. Then Flora detached herself, sat upright.

“I had written to please him—at first. But I laid all that aside—as he had to be laid aside. I concentrated on becoming independent. Hence! And now I know that writing that kind of stuff worked me round into the state where I had ceased to see how really atrocious it was. Then your book came along, your Richard lent it to me,—another singularity. And so—here we are.”

“But good heavens, *I* think you've done *wonders*. Just what *I* failed at. Meeting your obligations and all that. I wasn't courageous or clever enough——”

“Clever enough!” Flora's lip curled. “Well, I suppose it's what they *call* being clever. The great American fallacy. No, you couldn't write badly enough, I guess.”

“But you fulfilled your obligations?”

“Yes, in a way. There was another—it was to Lawrence. I forgot that. But that—I see now—since the worst of the pain is over—that is really the only one that matters. You see he——! Well, I'll fulfil it yet!”

“You certainly will. And—'bad'? Well, you surely know what *I* think about *that*!”

“Thank you! God bless you,” said Flora simply, turning to her and taking both her hands. Then she leaned and kissed Gertrude upon the forehead.

“God bless you, Richard Terrill. Here, I think, comes the other Richard.”

“I think I'll write *your* story some day,” added Flora as she rose and stood looking down on Gertrude. Coryat was coming across from the door.

“Heavens! Never! There's——. Why, I don't know what *I* can ever write about now, I'm sure,” Gertrude smiled

wanly. "Too much has *happened* to me, *actually*. You can't write it."

Flora smiled. She turned to Coryat. She beckoned to him mysteriously.

"By the way," she said, quite gravely, in a low tone, "do you know—come over here—I have a theory. I really suspect *her*," she nodded slightly at Gertrude, "*of being Richard Terrill!*"

Coryat flushed, as she suddenly smiled at him with supreme mirth, her lower lip caught between her teeth. "No, there, I'm unkind," she said. "But I couldn't resist it!"

"No, as for me," she said a moment later, from the doorway, "I forgive everybody, as I hope to be forgiven. All I am aware of is that Richard Terrill Bartlett Ventress Cole Gedney there thinks this last story of mine is really good."

* * *

Flora passed out into high noon on Poplar Street.

THE END

RETURN
TO

CIRCULATION DEPARTMENT
 202 Main Library

3405

LOAN PERIOD 1	2	3
HOME USE		
4	5	6

ALL BOOKS MAY BE RECALLED AFTER 7 DAYS
 1-month loans may be renewed by calling 642-3405
 6-month loans may be recharged by bringing books to Circulation Desk
 Renewals and recharges may be made 4 days prior to due date

DUE AS STAMPED BELOW

OCT 25 1981		
<i>Jan 25 1982</i>		
RET'D DEC 30 1981		

M295968

961
B466
+i

STEWART & KIDD CO.

Publishers, Booksellers, Stationers

121 East 5th St., Cincinnati.

